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## THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and the thesis of Jennifer Lee Zoltanski for the Master of Science in Sociology were presented May 26, 1995, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

### COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

[REDACTED]  
Grant M. Farr, Chair

[REDACTED]  
Robert C. Liebman

[REDACTED]  
Michael A. Toth

[REDACTED]  
Vikki L. Vandiver, Representative of the Office  
of Graduate Studies

### DEPARTMENTAL APPROVAL:

[REDACTED]  
Robert W. Shotola, Chair

\*\*\*\*\*

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## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Jennifer Lee Zoltanski for the Master of Science in Sociology presented May 26, 1995.

Title: Departure and Persistence: Exploring Student Experiences at the Master's Level.

Faculty and administrators in colleges and universities face the challenge of designing educational programs that will attract and retain college-bound students. Understanding what accounts for departure (dropout) and persistence (degree completion) clarifies the issues surrounding student retention and provides a basis for implementing policy and curricular changes at institutional and departmental levels.

This research explores the events and circumstances that lead to persistence and departure within the sociology master's program at Portland State University. It examines how individual and institutional characteristics interact and influence student decisions to dropout or continue in the master's program. It utilizes Vincent Tinto's (1993) theories of persistence and departure and his concepts of social and academic integration as they apply to sociology master's students. The purpose of the research was to describe how students became socially and academically

integrated and how integration influenced patterns of persistence of departure. The aim also was to determine whether background variables such as undergraduate GPA, cumulative master's GPA, enrollment status, and career and educational goals influenced student outcomes.

Interviews with 14 master's students were conducted and analyzed using the qualitative methodological orientations of Elizabeth Witt (1991) and Christie and Dinham (1991). Student profile records were also examined to determine the influence of attribute variables on student outcomes.

The results support the notion that persistence is a complex process that involves interplay between individual and institutional components. Degree completion was associated with academic integration with faculty, exemplified through the combined presence of graduate assistantship positions and mentoring relationships with faculty. Persistence in the form of continued enrollment was tied to social integration with peers. Delayed degree completion was tied to a perceived lack of academic integration with faculty members and with work, family, and financial responsibilities. Departure was associated with a perceived lack of academic integration with faculty members, financial strain, and work responsibilities.

**DEPARTURE AND PERSISTENCE: EXPLORING STUDENT EXPERIENCES  
AT THE MASTER'S LEVEL**

by

**JENNIFER LEE ZOLTANSKI**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE  
in  
SOCIOLOGY**

**Portland State University  
1995**

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This research began as collaborative effort involving the time, energy, ideas, and expertise of my friend and peer Katie Staples. Without her support and actual labor, this thesis may never have been written. I wish to thank Sheila Yacob for her help on Banner and for her support throughout the research project. I also wish to thank the members of my committee for their suggestions and encouragement. My thanks also go to Julia Banzi for typesetting the visual diagrams and to Dr. John L. Horn for his encouragement and editorial suggestions. A special thanks to my pals Coco and Calvin for keeping me company during the months it took to complete this thesis. Finally, my thanks go out to the actual participants in this study. Without their participation and cooperation this research could never have been conducted.

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Peter Zoltanski, who constantly encouraged me to stay in school and also provided the financial support necessary for me to complete my degree. This research is also dedicated to all sociology master's students at PSU who feel unprepared or unable to write a thesis. I hope this thesis will shed light on the research process and will help in future thesis writing endeavors.

## **PREFACE**

Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) reminds us to use life experiences in our intellectual pursuits. He states, "you must use your life experiences in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it" (Mills, p. 196). This thesis is a search for an understanding of the events and circumstances that lead to dropout and degree completion among sociology master's students at PSU. In many ways, this thesis represents a search for a better understanding behind my own experience as a student in the sociology master's program.

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## INTRODUCTION

Understanding what accounts for college persistence (staying in school until graduation) and departure (dropout) has become increasingly important to educators and administrators in institutes of higher education (Tinto 1993; Mutter 1992; Murguia, Padilla and Pavel 1991; Cabrera, Stampem and Hansen 1990). Reasons for departure seem to vary from student to student and from school to school. The characteristics of colleges, universities, departments and/or programs along with the composition of student populations within these domains often render explanations of dropout idiosyncratic. The nature and scope of departure is particularly complex, making instances of dropout difficult to measure and to understand.

In this thesis, I explore the events and circumstances that lead to departure and persistence within the master's program in sociology at Portland State University (PSU). I am specifically interested in how individual and institutional characteristics interact and influence student decisions to dropout or continue in the sociology master's program. In this thesis, I explore Tinto's theories of persistence and departure and his concepts of academic and social integration (1993) as they apply to sociology master's students at PSU. My research questions include: What causes some students to leave the sociology master's program? Why do other students finish? Why do some students complete the required coursework and not complete their theses? Have some students left the program with the idea of

returning someday? Have some students transferred into other departments or programs? Have some left higher education altogether?

Persistence and departure at the undergraduate level have been widely researched. Research on graduate level persistence and departure is comparatively scant. In addition, persistence and departure, whether at the undergraduate or graduate level, has generally been investigated quantitatively. This work has made it evident that there is a need for detailed qualitative analyses to provide a basis for truly meaningful quantitative analyses. For such reasons, I have used qualitative methods to explore patterns of dropout and degree completion among 14 sociology master's students. I used Tinto's Longitudinal Models of Student Departure (1993) as general theoretical guides from which to explore persistence and departure at the master's level. My aim in the research was to examine how background variables (such as undergraduate major, undergraduate GPA, cumulative master's GPA, enrollment status, and career/educational goals) and departmental characteristics interact and impact student decisions to remain in or leave the master's program. Sampling procedures produced three categories of master's students: 1) *finishers* (those who completed their degrees within 3.5 years of admittance); 2) *lingerers* (those who had completed all or nearly all required coursework but not their degrees within 3.5 years of admittance); and 3) *departers* (those who had left the master's program without completing their degrees within 3.5 years of admittance). Other characteristics of the sample are discussed in Chapter 3.

I developed open-ended interview guides based on Tinto's longitudinal models of departure and then used these to interview the three categories of students about their experiences in the graduate program. I then looked for patterns in student descriptions about their experiences that corresponded to Tinto's concepts of social and academic integration and examined how integration influenced student outcomes. Because the interviews were open-ended, concepts not present in Tinto's models also emerged from the data and were integrated into the descriptions of experiences.

The research aims to indicate how the structural characteristics of a particular sociology department impact the experiences and decisions of individual master's students. Because this department is distinct, with structural qualities not known to be shared with other sociology departments, and because the sample is small and has unique characteristics, the findings of this research cannot be confidently generalized beyond the conditions under study. The results do provide some insight into plausible patterns of persistence and departure among a specific group of sociology graduate students.

The following section discusses the theoretical models used in this research. This is followed by a review of research literature on persistence and departure.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **THEORETICAL APPROACH**

As previously stated, much of the research on persistence and departure has focused on undergraduates. Research on graduate level persistence and departure is scant and has largely focused on students enrolled in doctoral programs. Little is known about why students dropout or remain in terminal master's degree programs. According to Tinto (1993), a sociologist and educational researcher, the problem that confronts existing research on graduate persistence and departure is the lack of theory aimed at explaining instances of dropout and degree completion. To deal with this problem, the present research builds on concepts of Tinto's Longitudinal Models of Undergraduate and Doctoral Departure (1993). The undergraduate model, first formulated in the context of undergraduate departure, has been widely tested and accepted as one of the most comprehensive explanations of persistence and departure (Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda 1993; Mutter 1992; Murguia, Padilla and Pavel 1991; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora and Hengstler 1992; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Ott, Markewich and Ochsner 1984; Voorhees 1987; Cabrera, Stampen and Hansen 1990). A model applicable to graduate studies was developed only recently and thus is not well established.

My reasons for utilizing aspects of the undergraduate and graduate models are twofold. First, it seems that sociology master's students at Portland State

University (PSU) fall into a grey area with respect to the two theoretical models: they are neither undergraduates nor doctoral students. They are being socialized to enter doctoral programs upon completion of their degrees. Second, master's level work is often viewed as an extension of undergraduate studies. While master's level work requires students to work more independently, they are not required to produce an "original" thesis dissertation as are Ph.D. candidates. These factors indicate that the principles from both models of apply. These principles are examined in the following sections.

## **PRINCIPLES OF TINTO'S MODELS OF STUDENT DEPARTURE**

***Suicide and Dropout:*** Tinto (1993) viewed inadequate social and academic integration as crucial components in student decisions to leave college. His two models of student departure are based on Durkheim's concept of egotistical suicide. Egotistical suicide is thought to occur when: 1) an individual's value systems are significantly different from those of common society; and 2) when an individual is socially isolated as a result of insufficient involvement or affiliation with other members of society (Tinto 1993). According to Durkheim, these conditions must occur together in order for instances of egotistical suicide to follow. For Tinto, "when one views the college as a social system with its own value and social structures, one can treat dropout from that social system in a manner analogous to that of suicide in the wider society" (Tinto 1975, p. 91).

The Tinto theory specifies that the more connected students feel to their college environment, through satisfying interactions and relationships with faculty and peers (e.g., integration), the more likely they will complete their degrees. Positive interactions and relationships with members of the college community integrate students into the social and academic life of the institution and strengthen students' educational and career goals, motivating students to complete their college degrees.

In the longitudinal models of departure, four components interact and influence student decisions to either dropout or remain in school. They are: 1) pre-college individual attributes (ability, motivation, commitment); 2) academic integration; 3) social integration; and 4) external forces. These components appear along individual and institutional dimensions that interact to influence instances of departure and persistence. The theory specifies that departure can arise from individual sources such as from lack of ability, lack of motivation, and/or lack of commitment. The following section examines the individual sources of departure in detail.

## INDIVIDUAL SOURCES OF DEPARTURE

Two important properties influence student dropout on the individual level (Tinto 1987; 1993). These include individual *intentions* and *commitments*. Intentions are defined as "educational or occupational goals" (Tinto 1993, p. 39).



Commitments represent "motivation, drive and/or effort" (Tinto 1993, p. 42).

Each of these properties needs to be considered separately in order to understand their full effect on student departure and persistence.

***Individual Intentions:*** While Tinto describes individual intentions as career and/or educational goals, he states that such "goals are not always framed in the form of degrees and specific occupations" (Tinto 1993, p. 39). Thus people may enter college with intent of earning a specific degree in order to secure a job, or they may be in college for occupational training or advancement, or they may simply be there for the sake of learning--for personal enrichment or growth. The reasons for going to college will vary. By the same token, the reasons for leaving college will also vary. In some cases degree completion might not be part of one's educational plan. In addition, while intentions are often formed before students enter college, intentions may change during the course of a student's stay in school (Tinto 1993).

***Individual Commitments:*** Defined as motivation or drive, individual commitments are seen in two forms: 1) goal commitment; and 2) institutional commitment. The former is defined as "a person's willingness to work toward the attainment of personal educational and occupational goals" (Tinto 1993, p. 43). The latter is defined as "a person's dedication to the institution in which he/she is enrolled [and] indicates the degree to which one is willing to work toward the attainment of one's goals within a given higher educational institution" (Tinto

1993, p. 43). Chapter Two will discuss in detail the research relevant to the role individual commitments and intentions play in patterns of student persistence and departure.

The Tinto theory specifies that dropout is indirectly influenced by attribute variables such as race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, and ability. However, departure and persistence are more directly related to individual intentions and commitments as discussed above. Attribute variables shape a student's intentions and commitments, but college performance most likely reflects the types of interactions a student has within the academic and social systems of the institution where one is enrolled (Tinto 1993). Thus, students from different social and economic backgrounds enter college for a variety of reasons, each arriving with varying levels of ability and motivation. While background will shape one's reasons for going to college, persistence is seen by Tinto as being tied most directly to social and academic involvement (integration). The next section will discuss the social and academic systems of institutions of higher education and how these institutional systems influence patterns of persistence and departure.

### **INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES OF DEPARTURE**

According to Tinto's (1993) models of departure, four forms of individual experiences affect departure on the institutional level. They include: 1) adjustment; 2) difficulty; 3) incongruence; and 4) isolation. Tinto states that "of the great

variety of events or situations which appear to influence student departure, [these] four clusters stand out as leading to institutional departure" (Tinto 1993, p. 45). He maintains that students inevitably face academic difficulties and forms of social isolation at some point in their college careers. They adjust and cope in a variety of ways. Here, individual commitment levels are linked to persistence: strong goal commitments (i.e., reasons for attending college) help students to remain in school while weak commitments may lead students to withdraw (Tinto 1993).

Staying in college requires meeting academic standards of performance. Students may be unable to meet such standards and experience forms of academic difficulty. Students experiencing such difficulty often leave voluntarily rather than wait to be formally dismissed by the college. Academic dismissals account for less than 25 percent of all institutional departures nationally (Tinto 1993). Departure is more likely the result of mal-integration into the social and academic systems of the institution.

[Withdrawals] reflect the character of the individual's social and intellectual experiences within the institution. Specifically, they mirror the degree to which those experiences serve to integrate individuals into the social and intellectual life of the institution. Generally, the more satisfying those experiences are felt to be, the more likely are individuals to persist until degree completion. Conversely, the less integrative they are, the more likely are individuals to withdraw voluntarily prior to degree completion. (Tinto 1993, p. 50)

Mal-integration is usually the result of *incongruence* or *isolation*. Isolation is defined as: "absence of sufficient contact between the individual and members of

the social and academic communities of the college" (Tinto 1993, p. 55).

Incongruence is defined as: "the mismatch or lack of fit between the needs, interests, and preferences of the individual and those of the institution...it springs from individual perceptions of not fitting into or of being at odds with the social and intellectual fabric of the institution" (Tinto 1993, p. 50).

Five important origins of incongruence are identified (Tinto 1993, ps. 52-53):

1. Lack of ability. College work may be too difficult, resulting in a mismatch between individual levels of ability and the demands of the institution. Students may withdraw before dismissal occurs.
2. College work may not be challenging enough. Students may leave because they are bored. Students may leave because they are dissatisfied with the level of intellectual challenge offered by the institution.
3. Lack of commitment. Students may leave because they are not committed to doing the necessary work in college classes. Incongruence occurs between levels of commitment and the demands of the institution.
4. Mismatch with the social and academic norms of the institution. Students may leave because they feel at odds with the general orientation of the institution or program. They may leave because they feel at odds with and/or isolated from faculty members and/or peers.
5. Incongruence between student expectations of the institution and what that particular institution delivers. Mismatch may result from picking a school not suited to one's interests.

Social isolation is frequently the cause of voluntary withdrawal from college. This is particularly true during an undergraduate students' freshman year

(Tinto 1993). Social isolation often relates to one or more of the above described sources of incongruence. A student may experience one or all of these events which may result in feelings normlessness and isolation. While the majority of students are able to make the transition to college life--meet academic demands, establish new friendships, gain membership into various academic and/or social communities, some students do not adapt and thus withdraw from school (Tinto 1993). However, integrative and/or mal-integrative experiences may also reflect the "interactional fabric" of a particular institution (Tinto 1993).

As previously stated, Tinto views inadequate academic and social integration as crucial components is student decisions to leave college. As already implied, student integration occurs both socially and academically. Either kind of integration occurs through formal and informal levels of contact with the social and academic systems of the institution, usually through associations with peer groups, faculty members and university personnel. These systems of the institution are "mutually interdependent and reciprocal...events in one system necessarily impact upon activities in the other" (Tinto 1993, p. 119). Yet, academic integration occurs largely through identifying with the intellectual norms/values of the institution/program. It involves meeting academic standards, intellectual development, and formal/informal interactions with faculty, administrators and staff (Tinto 1993; Wolfe 1993). Academic integration appears to be closely linked to intellectual and social involvement with at least on faculty member. It is also

linked with peer interaction. It relates to student feelings of fit with the standards and/or orientations of the institution or program (Tinto 1993).

Social integration occurs through satisfying and/or positive interactions and friendships with peers, informal relations with faculty, and involvement in extracurricular activities (Tinto 1993). Tinto recognizes that the match and contact between students and the institution need not be extensive. "The person must find some compatible academic and/or social group with whom to establish membership and make those contacts" (Tinto 1993, p. 121).

Finally, social and academic integration is also influenced by circumstances external to the college/university. External factors include such things as student obligations to work and family, as well as the ability to finance one's education. External demands may require a student to work and/or enroll part-time, and may subsequently limit her/his involvement in the social and academic life of the institution or program. External demands may lead to academic difficulties as well as to the forms of incongruence and social isolation discussed above. The next section discusses how all of the factors--individual attributes and institutional characteristics--interact to provide some basis for explanation of instances of student persistence and departure.

## **A MODEL OF UNDERGRADUATE PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE**

According to this theory, college persistence is the result of a complex set of interactions among students and institutional personnel. It recognizes that pre-college attributes also affect how well students adjust to college life. The process of persistence is based on positive interactions and integrative experiences between the individual student and members of the institution of higher education. The process unfolds as students from different social and economic backgrounds enter college with diverse scholastic and social abilities, different career and educational goals, and different levels of goal commitment and motivation. These variables influence persistence, but the quality of interactions with one's peers and institutional personnel have a greater impact on decisions to either remain in or dropout of school. Positive interactions and integrative experiences strengthen individual educational/career goals and commitments to the achievement of such goals as graduation from college. On the other hand, in most cases of departure, unrewarding and/or negative interactions and experiences lead to feelings of isolation from the social and academic life of the institution. Such feelings may be the result of insufficient contact with members of the institution. These feelings may also be the result of feeling at odds with the prevailing value systems of the institution and/or of its members. Tinto states:

Departure arises out of a longitudinal process of interactions between a student with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, intentions and commitments and other members of the academic and social systems of the school.

Experiences in those systems as indicated by his/her intellectual (academic) and social (personal) integration continually modifies his/her intentions and commitments. Positive experiences (integrative ones) reinforce persistence though their import on heightened intentions and commitments both to the goal of completion and to the institution. Negative experiences weaken intentions and commitment, especially commitment to the institution, and enhance the likelihood of departure (Tinto 1993, p. 115).

Figure 1 (p. 15) provides a visual diagram of the processes involved in undergraduate persistence and departure. Pre-entry attributes (e.g., family background, individual attributes, pre-college schooling) shape student goals (e.g., educational/career), intentions (e.g., the degree to which one is committed his/her achieving goals), and institutional commitment (e.g., college choice and commitment to gaining entry into that college) as indicated by the lines joining the sets of circles. Collectively, pre-entry attributes and individual goals/commitments establish the types of experiences a student has within the social and academic systems of the institution. Continuance is the result of rewarding interactions and relationships with faculty, peers, and staff within the formal (academic) and informal (social) systems of the college/university. The undergraduate model specifies these systems as largely independent, as indicated by the two separate circles. Integrative social and academic experiences strengthen student goals/commitments and his/her dedication to institution. Interactions that enhance social involvement (e.g., social integration) and intellectual development (e.g., academic integration) increase the likelihood of continuance until degree



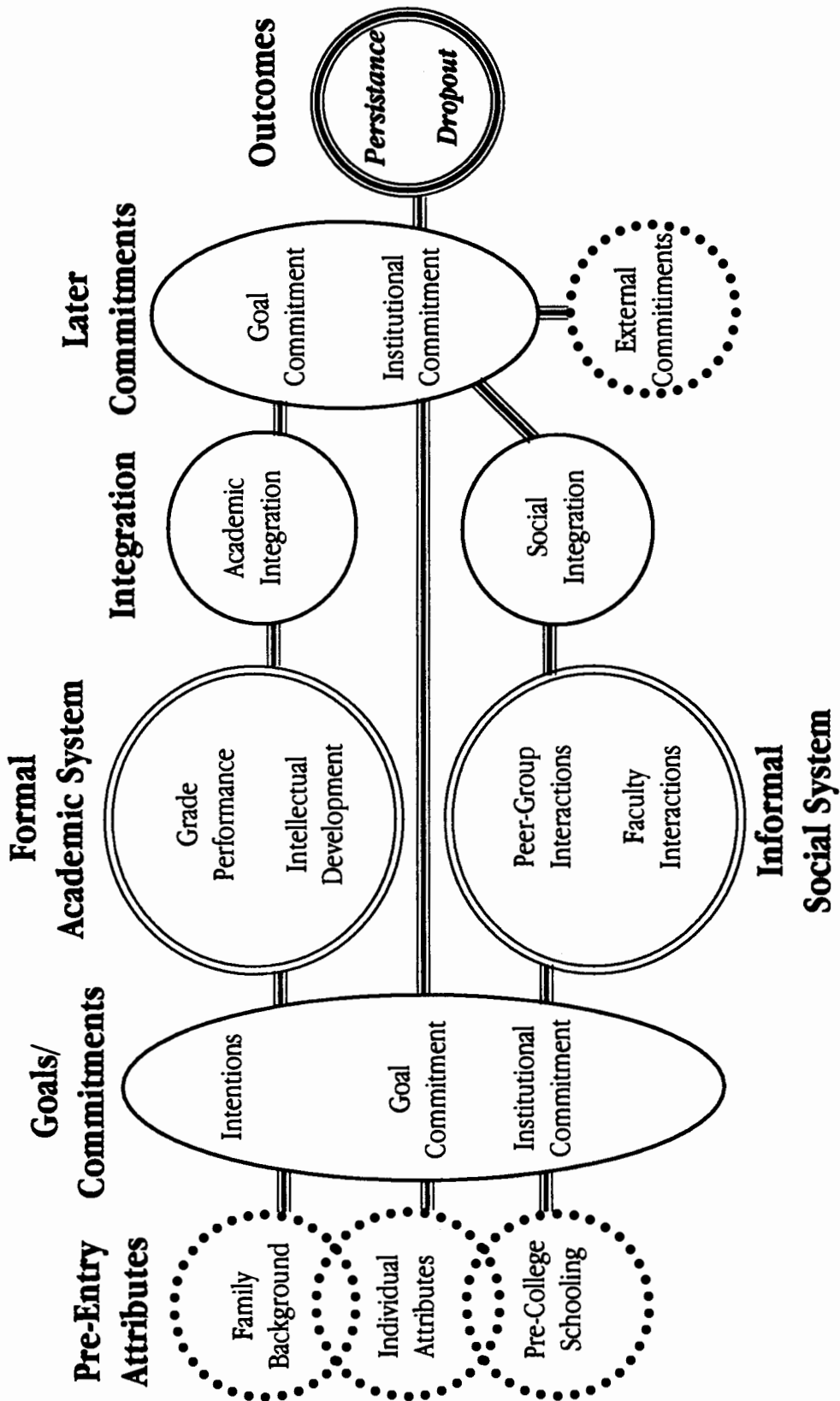


Figure 1: Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Undergraduate Departure

completion, as indicated the lines joining the circles. Departure is largely the result unrewarding social and academic experiences (e.g., social isolation and/or incongruence) which weaken one's commitment to the institution and to the goal of degree completion. External commitments (e.g., work, family, finances) may strengthen or diminish student educational goals/commitments and indirectly influence persistence or departure. (Tinto 1993, ps. 115-116).

Figure 2 (p. 17) provides a vertical illustration of persistence. Again, pre-college attributes shape initial educational and career goals and institutional commitment, as indicated. Integrative experiences (with faculty and peers) within the social and academic systems reinforce initial commitments to goals and the college/university. The end result is persistence.

## **A MODEL OF DOCTORAL PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE**

The doctoral model of persistence is similar to the undergraduate model in that it argues that persistence is again influenced by individual goals and commitments and by the types of academic and social interactions students have with each other and with university personnel. There are, however, important differences between the two processes. According to Tinto, the doctoral process is marked by three distinct stages: 1) *transition*; 2) *attaining candidacy*; and 3) *completion of a doctoral research project*. The following section discusses each of these stages.

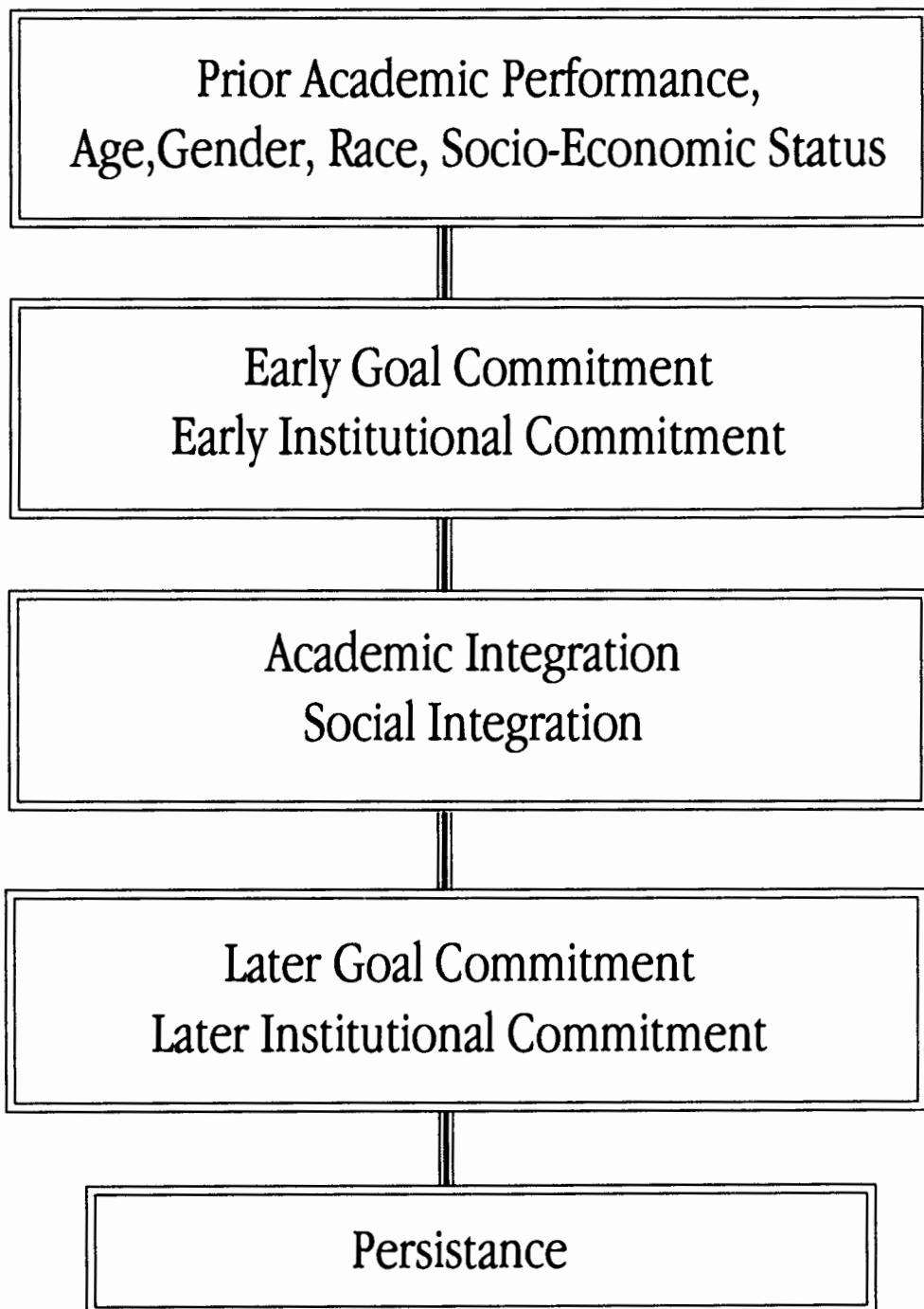


Figure 2: Brower's Conceptualization of Tinto's Undergraduate Model

***Transition:*** According to Tinto, this stage usually covers the first year of graduate school, whereby students try to establish membership in the social and academic communities of the university. Persistence in this stage is particularly influenced by the types of interactions students have with peers and faculty within their own programs or departments. As with the undergraduate model, Tinto sees individual career goals and levels of commitment to the goal of doctoral completion as important determinates of later persistence (Tinto 1993).

***Candidacy:*** This stage includes the passage of coursework and comprehensive exams thought necessary for doctoral work. Tinto argues that in this stage, persistence reflects individual abilities and skills. Also important are the character of personal interactions with the departmental community of faculty and peers with respect to perceived academic competence. Tinto argues that social experiences with faculty and peers, both within and beyond the classroom, influence student academic experiences. Social interactions with peers and faculty are tied to intellectual development and to the development of skills necessary for doctoral completion. In the doctoral model, academic and social integration overlap and "social experiences become part of one's academic experience and visa versa" (Tinto 1993, p. 236).

***Completion:*** This is the longest stage, covering the time from gaining candidacy to the completion of a research proposal, to the final completion of research and the defense of the dissertation (completion can take more than ten

years in some cases). During this stage there is a shift to more intense involvement with specific doctoral committee members. For such reasons, doctoral persistence may be highly idiosyncratic and is dependent upon the type(s) of relationship students have with a small number of faculty within their particular department. In addition, external factors, such as work and family, can either help or hinder persistence at this stage (Tinto 1993).

Primary reference groups (e.g., faculty, peers) influence doctoral persistence in a more profound manner than in undergraduate persistence. Persistence in graduate school typically reflects the normative and structural character of the particular programs/departments, rather than reflects the structure and standards of the broader institution. Judgements about student performance mirror departmental norms rather than institutional norms. For such reasons, social integration is closely linked to academic integration (Tinto 1993).

Figure 3 (p. 20) provides a visual diagram of the processes involved in doctoral persistence. Again, the model specifies that attribute variables shape individual goals (educational/career) as well as commitments (goal/institutional) upon entry into a doctoral program. External factors (work, family responsibilities) and the types of financial resources available to students will also affect forms of participation in graduate school (e.g., full or part-time status). Institutional experiences are influenced by the types of interactions a student has with the local community of faculty and peers. Social and academic integration overlap, as

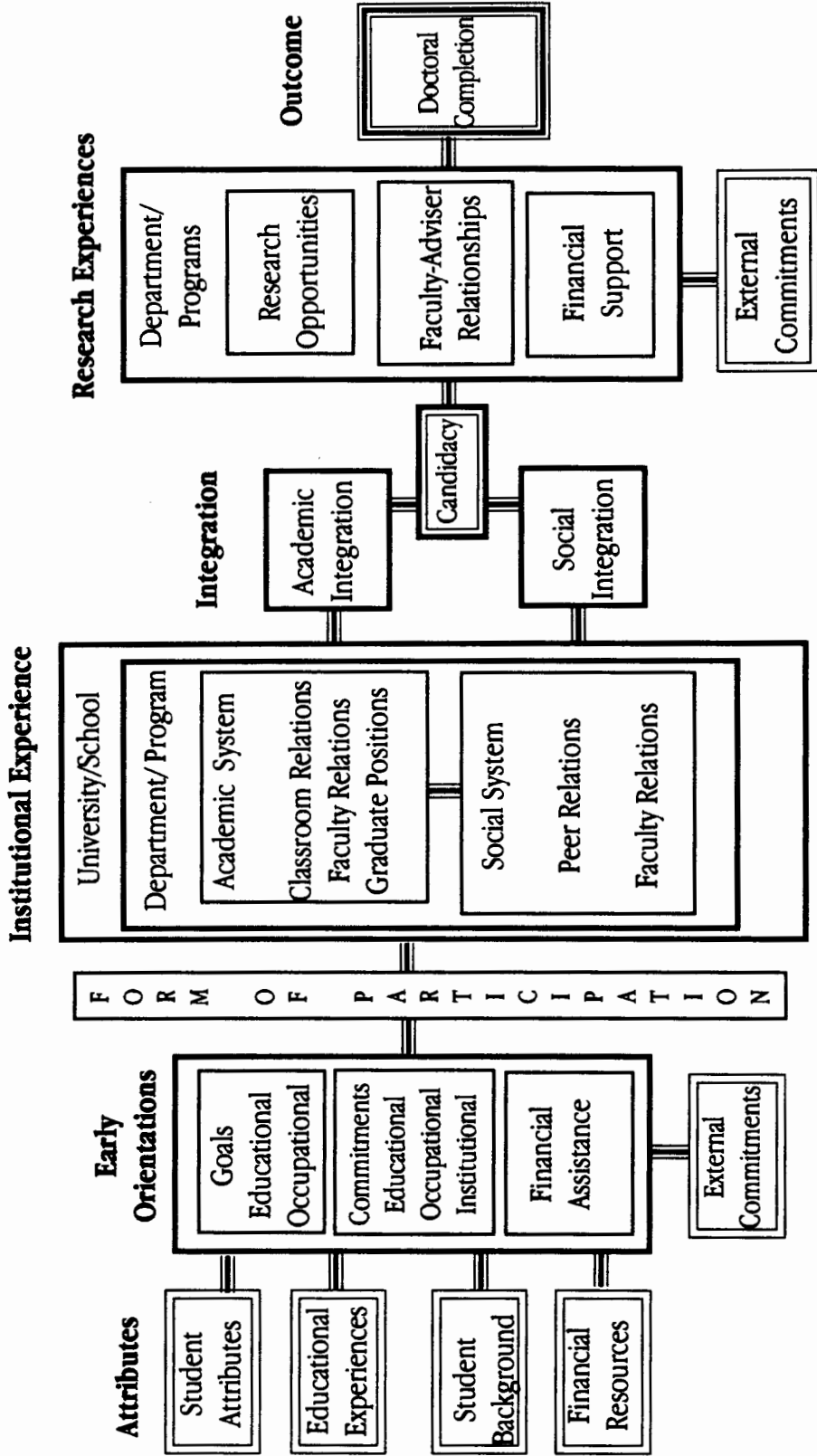


Figure 3: Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Doctoral Persistence

indicated by the line joining the two systems. Interactions with faculty and peers shape individual perceptions about membership in the academic/social community of the program (integration) and whether or not such membership is relevant to students' career, educational and institutional goals. Integration enables students to develop mentoring relationships with faculty members, crucial for the attainment of candidacy and for subsequent completion. Final completion is shaped by faculty-mentoring relationships and by the types of financial resources available to enable students to conduct their research projects and complete their doctoral dissertations (Tinto 1993, ps. 238-241).

### **A MODEL OF MASTER'S LEVEL PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE**

Tinto does not provide a model specific to the processes involved in master's student persistence. However, principles from both the undergraduate and the doctoral models of persistence provide a framework from which such processes can be organized and explored. For example, the three stages present in the doctoral model--transition, candidacy, and completion, exist on a more modest level for master's students. However, unlike doctoral students, sociology master's students at PSU are not required to take comprehensive exams. Also, rather than complete a dissertation, sociology master's students are required to write a thesis, which entails doing library and/or field research. Like doctoral students, sociology master's students work with a few selected faculty as a thesis committee during the

final completion stage. For such reasons, persistence at the master's level is expected to be idiosyncratic.

A master's degree obviously carries less academic weight than a Ph.D., and in many ways resembles an extended undergraduate degree. Yet, it seems likely that the experiences students have while pursuing their master's degrees will impact decisions regarding the continuation of studies at the doctoral level.

Figure 4 (p. 23) shows the components considered important in the process of master's student persistence. As in Tinto's two models, pre-entry attributes will shape the career/educational goals and institutional commitments of master's students. External factors and the types of financial resources available to students will also impact student participation in this program. Social and academic integration will tend to overlap as indicated by the overlapping circles that join the two systems. Social experiences with peers and faculty will impact academic development and influence levels of integration within the departmental community, and will subsequently influence persistence. Interactions and relationships here will affect student perceptions about the departmental community and assessments about membership within this community. Integration will also help students to develop mentoring relationships with faculty and this will impact persistence in the latter stages of completion. Final completion is shaped by thesis committee relations and by the types of financial resources available to enable students to conduct and complete their master's theses.



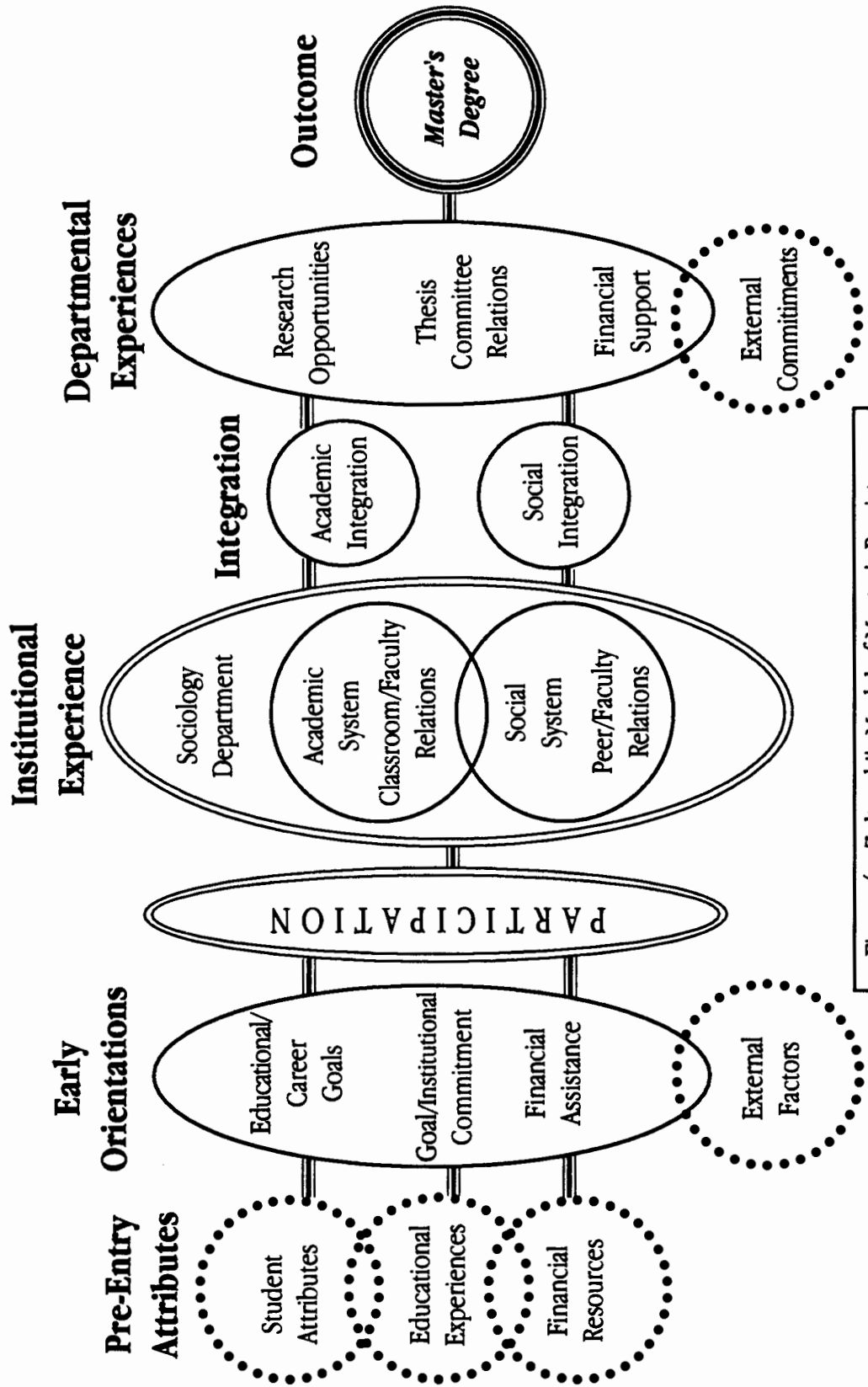


Figure 4: Zoltanski's Model of Master's Persistence

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH ON DEPARTURE AND PERSISTENCE**

The nature and scope of continuance and dropout from institutions of higher education is complex, difficult to measure and difficult to understand. The characteristics of the colleges, universities, departments and/or programs, and fields of study, the composition of student populations all render explanations of persistence and departure idiosyncratic (Tinto 1993). Variables commonly thought to influence persistence among undergraduates include age, race, gender, socioeconomic status, skill and ability test scores (SAT, ACT, scores and High School GPA), college GPA, enrollment status (part/full-time), school type (public/private), resident status (on or off-campus resident), financial ability, degree sought, educational and career goals, expected earnings upon graduation, family and work responsibilities. The dependent variable, persistence, is usually operationalized as re-enrollment after one or many semesters of school or completion of a specified degree or certificate from the institution where one is enrolled (Tinto 1993).

While research on the factors associated with undergraduate departure has increased in recent years, the same cannot be said of research pertaining to departure from master's and/or doctoral programs. Yet, the scant research on graduate student experiences does indicate that many of the variables thought to influence undergraduate departure and persistence (such as those listed in the

opening paragraph) are also present at the graduate level. The processes involved in undergraduate and graduate level dropout and degree completion are thought to be similar (Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Tinto 1993). For such reasons, the following section examines the research pertaining to both undergraduate and graduate instances of persistence and departure. An effort has been made to discuss the research in accordance with Tinto's four theoretical constructs: 1) goals/commitments; 2) academic integration; 3) social integration; and 4) external forces. In some cases, the research pertaining to these concepts overlaps.

### **THE INFLUENCE OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS ON PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES**

Tinto's Model of Undergraduate Departure has been widely tested and accepted as one of the most comprehensive explanations of the events that lead to college dropout and degree completion among undergraduates (Cabrera et al 1993; Mutter 1992; Wolfe 1993; Murguia et al 1991; Cabrera et al 1992; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Ott et al 1984; Voorhees 1987; Cabrera et al 1990). As discussed in the previous chapter, the model specifies that the better connected students are to their college environment through successful and/or personally rewarding interactions with members of the social and academic systems (integration), the more likely they will remain and finish their degrees. The model also sees individual goals, levels of commitment and motivation as important determinates of degree completion. The model posits that integrative experiences

within the academic and social systems of the university indirectly strengthen student commitments to the institution and to the end goal of graduation from college.

Research on undergraduates has shown that the presence of educational/career goals and the motivation to attain such goals are crucial factors in instances of student departure (Tinto 1993; Mutter 1992; Cabrera et al 1992; Livengood 1992; Stage 1989b). Generally speaking, the higher one's educational/career goals, the more likely a student will persist and graduate (Tinto 1993). This is especially true if the degree is required for entry into specific occupations and/or for career advancement (Mutter 1992; Stoecker 1991).

Mutter's survey research on community college students (1992) found significant differences between race and levels of goal commitment. All persisters in the sample (both Black and White, women and men) reported greater degrees of confidence in their career choices than did non-persisters. The findings indicated that African American students attached greater importance to the goal of college graduation than did White students. Also significant, African American students reported being more clear about their career choices and outcomes than did White students. The results thus indicate that among community college students, measures of goal commitment (e.g., high level of commitment and clarity of goals) are associated with persistence (Mutter 1992).

Livengood's research on undergraduates (1992) found significant differences between learning-goal oriented students and performance-goal oriented students in measures of academic success and persistence (e.g., college GPA, re-enrollment) and levels of satisfaction and confidence. According to Livengood, the learning-goal orientation represents a "means for increasing intelligence" while performance-goal orientation indicates a "means for receiving a positive evaluations from others." Learning-goal oriented students reported higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience and had higher first semester GPA's. Livengood's findings provide a different slant on Tinto's concept of goal commitment and provide additional insight into the relationship between motivational orientations and student academic success (Livengood 1992).

Grosset's longitudinal research on undergraduates (1991) found differences in persistence and departure patterns between younger students (under the age of 25) and older students (aged 25 years and older) at a four year institution. Persistence among younger students related to academic integration and goal commitment, with quality rather than quantity of interactions with faculty members cited as the most important factor behind measures of academic success (i.e., re-enrollment or degree completion). Younger persisters also reported having clearer educational goals and plans than did non-persisters. Older persisters (unlike their younger counterparts) attached greater importance to feeling prepared for the academic demands of higher education than did non-persisters. Positive evaluations

of college experiences were also tied to persistence. Students who reported that they benefitted from college, personally and/or professionally, were more likely to finish than students who gave more negative evaluations of their experiences. Finally, contrary to one research hypothesis, persisters (both young and old) were financially and emotionally responsible for a greater number of dependents (children and/or relatives) than were non-persisters (Grosset 1991).

Survey research conducted by Mallette and Cabrera (1991) on the differences between dropout, transfer and persistence behavior among a cohort of college freshmen found the following results:

1. Persisters had higher GPA's and had significantly higher levels of institutional commitment than did "dropouts."
2. Persisters were more likely to perceive that faculty were concerned with teaching and with student development than "dropouts."
3. Persisters were more satisfied with their ability to finance their education than were "dropouts."
4. Persisters had significantly higher goal aspirations than did transfer students. Neither academic performance nor financial attitudes explained decisions to transfer (ps. 188-89)

Mallette and Cabrera conclude that their research demonstrates the need for a broad definition of departure, as indicated by the presence of different types of experiences that lead to dropout and transfer decisions among their sample of college freshmen. They suggest that dropout behavior could be reduced by implementing programs which focus on academic development, faculty-student

interactions, institutional commitment, and student finances. Transfers could be reduced by implementing programs which emphasize institutional and goal commitments (Mallette and Cabrera 1991).

Cabrera, Castenada, Nora and Hengstler's longitudinal study of freshman persistence (1992) validated nearly 70 percent of the hypotheses described in Tinto's Undergraduate Model of Departure, among which included measures of association between goal commitments and persistence. Academic and social integration were significantly and positively related to goal and institutional commitment, supporting other studies that indicate "a predictive relationship between behavioral intentions and actual behaviors" (Cabrera et al 1992, p. 153).

In sum, the findings of the research discussed in this section suggest that persistence (verses departure) from a specific institution is influenced by: 1) commitment to graduation (Mutter 1992; Grosset 1991; Livengood; Mallette and Cabrera 1991); 2) commitment to the institution, which reinforces educational and/or career goals, and increases the likelihood that the student will either re-enroll or finish her/his degree. Tinto (1993) argues that the perceived benefits of earning a degree from a specific institution will lead some individuals to persist, despite unsatisfactory social and/or academic experiences in school. In these cases, persistence is closely linked to fulfilling career/occupational goals (Mutter 1992; Stoecker 1991; Smith and Davidson 1992).

## **THE INFLUENCE OF BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS ON PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS**

Research has shown that at entry, full-time graduate students are more likely to persist than part-time students (Ott et al 1984; Cook and Swanson 1978; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Andrieu and St. John 1993), that GPA at the master's level is a predictor of persistence (Girves and Wemmerus 1988), and that students with graduate assistantships are more likely to graduate than students without assistantships (Cook and Swanson 1978; Girves and Wemmerus 1988). A problem of interpretation is that these variables are not independent and also involve other other variables (e.g., academic ability) that are not isolated.

Andrieu and St. John's 1993 survey of nearly 4900 master's and doctoral students in both public and private universities yielded interesting findings on graduate persistence including the following:

1. Persistence was higher among graduate students whose mothers had less than a high school education or some college. By contrast, students whose mothers had advanced degrees were less likely to persist.
2. Graduate students who were working outside of the program were less likely to persist than students who did not work.
3. Graduate students in private universities were more likely to persist than those in public universities, when the influence of tuition cost was statistically controlled.
4. Graduate students in public programs with lower post-graduation expected earnings were less likely to persist.



5. The amount of graduate assistantship awarded to students in public schools was negatively associated with persistence (ps. 408-416).

Stoecker's survey research (1991) on full-time employed physical therapists' found a strong association between the goal of occupational development and decisions to reenter school at the graduate level. The importance of improving clinical/technical skills necessary for work was the most important factor behind participants' reasons to return to school. Income was negatively associated with decisions to return to school. The higher the income of a participant, the less likely s/he returned to school for additional training. Students who attended research oriented schools as undergraduates were less likely to enter graduate programs. Women were less likely to return to school than males. Finally, respondents reported a significantly greater need for acquiring practical skills over research skills. Stoecker states:

Students who delay entrance in order to get practical experience appear to enter graduate school in order to build on that experience. This student goal may not be compatible with the current mission of most graduate schools and graduate faculty who espouse the research mission...[O]nce enrolled, the divergence of the student's purpose and the institution's purpose may create poor-institutional fit, resulting in a dissatisfying and possibly unsuccessful graduate school experience (p. 696).

Although Stoecker's research relates more to the reasons for entry into graduate programs than to instances of persistence and departure, her findings provide some insight into the types of influences that impact student decisions to

enter graduate school. In addition, her findings illustrate possible sources of incongruence or "feeling at odds" (Tinto 1993) with the goals/orientations of the institution that may lead to departure.

Berg and Ferber's early survey research (1983) comparing a cohort of male and female graduate students at the University of Illinois found no differences in departure rates among men and women. However, the study did find differences between men and women in their choice of academic discipline and in their degree ambitions. Their findings revealed that most women were pursuing master's degrees in education, while most men were planning to obtain doctoral degrees in the biological and physical sciences. The study found no differences in grade point averages between men and women, regardless of academic discipline (science or education). In addition, male and female students reported having close professional relationships with faculty members of the same sex. Berg and Ferber argue that this finding reflects the sex segregated nature of academia, with more male professors/students located in the natural sciences and more female professors/students located in such disciplines as education. Based on this assumption, they conclude that female student's experiences within the natural science disciplines would likely be less socially and academically integrative. The same might be said of male students who venture into disciplines traditionally thought to be female (Berg and Ferber 1983).

## ACADEMIC INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE

Integration is viewed by Tinto and other researchers as a key component in student persistence (Tinto 1993; Pascarella, Terenzini and Hibel 1978; Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann 1994; Wolfe 1993; Murguia et al 1991; Mutter 1992; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Ethington and Pisani 1993; Cook and Swanson 1978; Ott et al 1984; Attinasi 1989). Integration, whether social or academic, is seen to strengthen student commitments to their university/program, subsequently strengthening degree completion goals.

Stage's survey research on undergraduates (1989a) using reciprocal causation analysis techniques found that the effects of gender differentially influenced levels of academic and social integration and subsequent patterns of persistence. Her findings indicate that for women, social integration significantly and positively influenced academic integration. The more socially integrated a female student felt, the more likely she was achieving academically. By contrast, the more academically integrated the male student, the more likely he was integrated socially. Thus, persistence among women was associated with higher levels of social integration. Persistence among males was influenced by higher levels of academic integration (Stage 1989b).

Additional undergraduate survey research conducted by Stage (1989b) found that the effects of academic and social integration differed depending upon certain background variables and student motivations for enrollment in college. As

concerns motivations, a factor analysis of the data indicated three distinct types of orientations:

1. Certification: Students enrolled in order to "earn a degree and/or get a job."
2. Cognitive: Students enrolled "for the sake of learning."
3. Community service: Students enrolled to "gain skills for helping people." (ps. 389-90)

Persistence for male students in the certification group was negatively related to mother's education level--that is, male students whose mothers had low levels of education most likely to persist. By contrast, male students in the cognitive group whose mothers had high levels of education were more likely to persist. Minority students in the certification group with higher measures of social integration were more likely to persist. The patterns of persistence in the community service group most resembled those specified in Tinto's model of student integration. In this group, "academic integration influenced persistence indirectly through later goal commitment and social integration influenced persistence through institutional commitment" (Stage 1989b, p. 399).

Other studies indicate that academic integration directly relates to student persistence at undergraduate level (Mutter 1992; Pascarella et al 1978; Van Stone et al 1994; Stage 1989a; Stage 1989b; Mallette and Cabrera 1992). These studies show that academic integration is achieved largely through interactions with faculty members and other university personnel. According to these researchers, contact

with faculty members fosters intellectual development and strengthens student commitments to the institution and to the goal of graduation (Mutter 1992; Pascarella et al 1978; Terenzini and Wright 1987).

Mutter's research on undergraduates (1992) found that persisters tended to spend more hours preparing classroom assignments, had higher predicted GPA's, and reported having more conversations with faculty, staff, or advisors about academic-career issues than did non-persisters (Mutter 1992). Pascarella, Terenzini and Hibel's early longitudinal research (1978) found that predicted and actual academic performance (GPA) among undergraduates was significantly and positively associated with informal faculty-student interactions that emphasized intellectual development (Pascarella et al 1987). By contrast, infrequent and/or unsatisfying interactions with faculty are reported to cause departure (Tinto 1993; Stage 1989a; Stage 1989b). The perception that faculty-student interactions are formal (rather than informal) and/or limited to academic work are also tied to instances of departure (Pascarella et al 1978; Mutter 1992; Terenzini and Wright 1987).

Studies indicate that faculty-student interaction are particularly important to graduate level persistence (Cook and Swanson 1978; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Ethington and Pisani 1991; Schroeder and Mynatt 1993; Smith and Davidson 1992). The value of such interactions are best summarized by Tinto:

[T]he process of doctoral persistence is more likely reflective of, and framed by, the particular communities that reside in the local

department, program, or school. Social membership within one's program becomes part and parcel of academic membership, and social interactions with one's peers and faculty becomes closely linked not only to one's intellectual development, but also to the development of important skills necessary for doctoral completion. In a very real sense, the local community [of faculty and peers] becomes the primary educational community for one's graduate career (1993, p. 232).

Van Stone, Nelson & Niemann's qualitative and quantitative research (1994) on poor single-mother college students, both graduate and undergraduate, found that having professional and/or personal relationships with faculty was one of the greatest determinates of perceived academic success. Relationships with faculty (e.g., being encouraged, feeling understood by faculty, and receiving feedback on their work) was cited as one of the most important factors behind student reports of satisfaction with their college experience and with their academic performance (Van Stone et al 1994).

Survey research by Smith and Davidson (1992) on the influence of mentoring experiences and peer networking on the professional development of African American doctoral students found that faculty support (having a mentor) had more impact on students' perceived levels of integration than did support from peers. Students with mentors reported having more opportunities for professional development and career advancement (e.g., teaching, participation in conferences, publishing) than did students without mentors. Involvement in such activities positively impacted feelings of integration within the academic and social systems

of the graduate programs under study. Mentoring positively impacted student experiences regardless of the race of the particular faculty member lending mentoring support (Smith and Davidson 1992).

Ott, Markewich and Ochsner's survey research on graduate students (1984) found that the gender influenced social integration at the doctoral level. Using multiple regression analysis to determine which independent variables influenced persistence, they found that female doctoral students were less likely to persist in programs where males students represented a majority (Ott et al 1984).

Schroeder and Mynatt's study of female graduate students experiences in a doctoral program (1993) found that faculty concern for student welfare influenced some cases of persistence. However, contrary to their main hypothesis, the gender of one's doctoral advisor/chair had little to do with instances of departure and persistence (Schroeder and Mynatt 1993).

Using path analysis techniques to predict graduation from doctoral programs, Cook and Swanson (1978) found that the acceptance of a research proposal by a student's dissertation committee was the strongest predictor of doctoral degree completion among the students in their sample. This finding may relate to Tinto's notion of completion, the last stage in the doctoral model of persistence whereby final completion is shaped by faculty-mentoring relationships (Tinto 1993). Cook and Swanson also found that the highest rates of dropout (28.9 percent) occurred during students' first year of enrollment, followed by a second

wave of dropout (9.8 percent) occurring between the stages of candidacy and dissertation proposal acceptance. Although the exact reasons for these waves of departure was not thoroughly explained by Cook and Swanson, one can speculate that they relate to Tinto's notions incongruence and/or social isolation.

Research by Girves and Wemmerus (1988) also indicates the importance of student-faculty relationships as a determinate of graduate students perceptions of academic success and professional career development. Their findings indicate that persistence related to the types of academic and career guidance (e.g., satisfying and useful) that master's students received from advisors in their programs. Perceived feelings of involvement directly related to academic success at the doctoral level. Involvement with one's academic advisor (chair) played a crucial role in doctoral persistence. In addition, Girves and Wemmerus found that students with teaching and research assistantships were more likely to complete. The researchers conclude that these students likely felt more involved with their program, spent more time in the department, and had more opportunities to develop professional and personal relationships with faculty members (Girves and Wemmerus 1989). Such students are usually selected for their promise and academic abilities over students who do not have research and teaching assistantships, and they thereby also have the financial means to continue.

More recent research on the relationship between graduate assistantships and persistence (Ethington and Pisani 1993) shows that students who worked as



research assistants perceived their experience as contributing more to their academic and professional growth and development than did students who worked as teaching assistants. Ethington and Pisani argue that graduate assistantships (whether research or teaching) link students with faculty. The assistantship experience will shape the quality and extent of a student's social and academic integration, and will subsequently influence persistence (Ethington and Pisani 1993).

### **SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND PERSISTENCE**

Research shows close contact with peers may compensate for limited and/or unsatisfying contact with faculty, and may prevent some students from dropping out of school (Tinto 1993; Stage 1989b). Friendship networks can increase feelings of attachment to the institution, and strengthen degree completion goals (Van Stone et al 1994; Murguia et al 1991; Stage 1989b; Christie and Dinham 1991; Attinasi 1989). While some students may be unable to establish meaningful social relationships with members of the college/university, poor social integration may reflect the "interactional fabric of the institution itself" (Tinto 1993, p. 58).

Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann's research on female college students (1994) found that sociological factors such as social and emotional support from family, faculty and peers had a greater impact on perceived academic success (e.g., re-enrollment, high GPA) than did psychological factors such as ambition, discipline, prior knowledge and experience. However, moral and emotional

support from peers was cited as the most important factor behind student reasons for continuing college. Family emotional support was cited as another significant factor in successful academic performance ( Van Stone et al 1994).

Murguia, Padilla and Pavel's research on the impact of ethnicity on the process of social integration among undergraduates (1991) found that when minority students are viewed by others as members of specific ethnic enclaves, social integration is more difficult for them to achieve on the institutional level. In addition, when minority students see themselves as members of such enclaves, rather than as members of the wider institution itself, social integration is more difficult for these students to experience. Alienation, either perceived or actual, can cause departure (Tinto 1993). According to these researchers, "ethnicity can limit access to majority enclaves either through self-selection or through enforced segregation" (p. 436).

Christie and Dinham's qualitative research on undergraduates (1991) found that students living in on-campus dormitories felt more socially integrated than did students who lived off-campus. Students who lived in dormitories reported having more opportunities to meet other students, to establish friendships, and to gain information about on-campus social activities than did students who lived off-campus. Participation in extracurricular activities was cited by both on and off-campus students as the most important factor behind involvement in the social life of the college.

Attinasi's research on Mexican-American freshmen (1989) found that relationships with peers and student-mentors greatly influenced student perceptions about college persistence. Using symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology as methodological orientations, Attinasi discovered a grounded construct labeled "getting-in" which closely resembles Tinto's notion of social integration. For incoming freshmen, the process of "getting-in" involved interactions with student mentors already at the college, who "function as guides or interpreters of the physical, social and academic geographies" (p. 263) of the institution. Student mentors helped new students negotiate their new environment by giving them campus tours and offering knowledge and advice on academic departments and on extracurricular activities. Establishing friendships with other newcomers was another important factor in persistence. Attinasi describes this process as "peer knowledge-sharing" whereby freshmen explored the boundaries of the institution together and subsequently shared in common experiences. Attinasi argues that the processes involved in "getting-in" are important for persistence because they:

[I]ntegrate the student into the physical and academic/cognitive geographies as well as the social geography by providing [them] with knowledge of these geographies and the skills to negotiate them. [S]tudents become integrated for distinctly more cognitive, and less moral reasons" (p. 268).

## EXTERNAL FORCES AND PERSISTENCE

External forces, such as finances, family and work responsibilities, impact persistence in a variety of ways. Students who commute to college/university campuses report having more difficulty interacting with faculty and peers than do residential students (Wolfe 1993; Christie and Dinham 1991; Tinto 1993). Research also indicates that students who have more family responsibilities and/or demanding work schedules have less time to spend on campus, are less likely to interact with faculty and peers, and are more inclined to feel less socially and academically connected to the institution (Cabrera et al 1993; Van Stone et al 1994; Wolfe 1993). Such students are often candidates for departure (Tinto 1993).

While family responsibilities may pull some students away from school, research has shown that significant others (e.g., family and close friends) play an important part in student decisions to persist by providing such things as financial support and encouragement (Van Stone et al 1994; Christie and Dinham 1991). Women students in Van Stone, Nelson and Niemann's research reported that support from family members, especially from their children, played some role in their decisions to continue school (Van Stone et al 1994).

Attinasi's research (1989) found that parents, siblings, and high school teachers directly and indirectly influenced student decisions to attend college. According to Attinasi, student decisions to attend and stay in college were based on "anticipatory socialization," a process whereby students model themselves after

siblings who are already in college and/or conform to expectations held by parents, siblings, and teachers that s/he will enter college.

Research by Christie and Dinham (1991) found that ties with former high school friends facilitated and inhibited some students' involvement with the social life of the college. Students who continued their associations with high school friends not attending the same college reported having less time to devote to establishing new friendships and attending campus social activities. Here, former high school friends reportedly restricted social integration. By contrast, social integration was enhanced among students whose high school friends attended that same college. Here, continued friendships provided students with more extensive peer support networks (e.g., making new friends through old friends) and enabled them to adapt more readily to their new college environment (Christie and Dinham 1991).

Christie and Dinham also found that parents impacted the extent of student social integration in college. Students who lived with their parents while attending college reported having limited opportunities to participate in extracurricular and school social activities. The combination of living off-campus with parents appeared to inhibit social integration. By contrast, students who lived more independently, that is, away from home, participated in a fuller range of social and extracurricular activities that facilitated social integration (Christie and Dinham 1991).

Finances also appear to impact persistence. The ability to finance one's education has been found to directly affect academic and social integration. Students who have trouble paying for school may be required to work and/or be focused on financial difficulties. This can moderate one's commitments, and can lead to departure (Cabrera et al 1992; Andrieu and St. John 1993).

Longitudinal research conducted Cabrera, Stampen and Hansen (1990) on nearly 1400 undergraduates enrolled at a four year institution found that finances had a direct impact on student decisions to leave college. Students reportedly dissatisfied with the costs of attending college were more likely to withdraw from school than students satisfied with attendance costs. Similarly, measures of socioeconomic status related to persistence. The researchers compared self-reported student demographic data and figures computed by the National Center for Education Statistics (which measured and weighted parental education levels, family income, father's occupation, and household items) and found that students in the upper SES quartiles were less likely to withdraw. Thus, the higher the student's socioeconomic status, the less likely s/he would withdrawal. The researchers argue that ability to pay for one's education influences students' educational goals and commitments and directly influences persistence and departure. They state:

The ability to pay is best understood as factor that directly affects decisions to persist, while it simultaneously moderates the effect of goal commitment and institutional commitment. Students are likely to be less committed to the institution when the costs of attending make alternatives like a full-time job or switching school more appealing" (p. 330).

## CONCLUSION

The research reviewed in this chapter illustrates the wide range of variables used to measure and predict instances of persistence and departure among graduate and undergraduate students. Yet most of these researchers indicated that their findings are limited, and not directly generalizable to populations beyond those studied (Christie and Dinham 1991; Attinasi 1989; Mallette and Cabrera 1991; Stage 1989a; Stage 1989b; Grosset 1991; Mutter 1992; Wolfe 1993; Murguia et al 1991; Van Stone et al 1994; Livengood 1992; Smith and Davidson 1992; Ethington and Pisani 1993; Schroeder and Mynatt 1993; Berg and Ferber 1983; Stoecker 1991; Andrieu and St. John 1993; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Ott et al 1984; Cook and Swanson 1978; Pascarella et al 1978). Again, the qualities of particular colleges, universities, departments and/or programs along with the unique characteristics of the student samples make it impossible to specify all necessary and sufficient conditions for continuance or dropout (or transfer or stopout).

This review of research also demonstrates the need for qualitative explorations of persistence and departure. Precisely what effect (in the minds of students) do variables such as individual background, goals, commitments, involvement with faculty and peers, and external forces have on master's student outcomes using qualitative analyses? Only three of the studies reviewed in this chapter (Christie and Dinham 1991; Attinasi 1989; Van Stone et al 1994) used qualitative methods for research. Out of these three, only one study included

graduate students in the sample of research participants (Van Stone et al 1994).

Attinasi's study of persistence among Mexican American freshmen (1989) is the best example of the rich data that can be generated by using qualitative research methods. No doubt, his grounded concept of "getting-in" would have appeared as a more restricted measure of social integration had survey research been conducted.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

In applying Vincent Tinto's theory, models, and concepts of integration and persistence/departure to study sociology master's students at PSU, I aimed to explore the possible causes of persistence and departure as perceived and experienced by actual students. I searched for an insider's understanding of integration and how integration influenced the processes involved in persistence and departure at the master's level. Qualitative research methods are most appropriate for this type of investigation.

In addition to the guidance provided by Tinto's theory, there was direction from the methodological orientations of Christie and Dinham (1991) and Elizabeth Witt (1991). Witt notes that important value of qualitative methods in studies of student affairs is that they "enable researchers to discover, understand, and describe everyday, as well as unique, events, processes, activities, behaviors, in depth as they occur, and from the perspectives of the persons involved" (p. 409). Research by Christie and Dinham explored student perceptions of social integration and discovered categories of experiences that led to persistence among undergraduates. The present research is similar to the Christie and Dinham research in that it, too, is a search for some understanding of how persons involved in university education perceive and feel about their experiences.

The present research is guided by speculations about the possible causes of persistence, lingering, and departure. Drawing from concepts in Tinto's theory, as outlined in the previous chapters, and the foregoing methodological orientations of qualitative research, I explored the following themes with master's students and then looked for patterns of experiences that led to their persistence or dropout from the master's program:

1. Career/Educational Goals: Pre-master's program career and educational aspirations. Student reasons for entering the master's program.
2. Commitment to Degree Completion: Dedication to obtaining the master's degree. Reasons for continued enrollment in the program.
3. Integration: Feelings of involvement and connection within the academic and social systems of the sociology department and program. Faculty-student interactions and relationships, and peer interactions and relationships.
4. External Forces: Life events and circumstances outside of the sociology department, such as employment status, financial circumstances, the role of significant others. The impact of these factors on student experiences.
5. The Processes of Persistence/Departure: The sources of these outcomes.

### **SAMPLING PROCEDURES**

Witt notes that qualitative research requires flexible and creative research design (p. 410). In this research, sampling procedures and methods for subject recruitment were adapted as the research process unfolded. Both snowball and

random sampling procedures were used in an attempt to produce the broadest range of sociology master's students as possible.

Purposive sampling was employed in the first stage of the research project. I determined a sampling frame by setting dates for initial selection into the sample. Sociology master's students are allowed seven years to complete their degrees. The dates for initial selection into the sampling frame were set from fall quarter 1985 to spring quarter 1992 in order to include as many student outcomes as possible. Other criteria for selection into the sampling were: 1) student records of enrollment. A prospective subject had to have enrolled in the program between fall 1985 and spring 1992; 2) degree sought. A prospective subject had to have declared intent to obtain a master's in sociology; and 3) completion of at least three graduate core requirements in sociology. In accordance with these criteria, a list was generated (n=61) using PSU Banner System. I obtained a departmental list (n=59) of students admitted to the program during the same seven year time span. The Banner List and the departmental list were compared to eliminate non-sociology master's students, admitted but non-enrolled students, and repeated names. The procedures produced a sampling frame of 42 potential participants. Eliminating myself from the sampling frame, the final sampling frame was reduced to 41 sociology master's students.

Sociology master's students complete their degrees in an average of 3.5 years. This completion rate was used to categorize and describe the different types

of student outcomes found in the sampling frame. Outcome categories were formed for the purposes of describing the data set. The categories consisted of three types of students: *finishers*, *lingerers*, and *departers*. *Finishers* are defined as students who had completed their master's degrees within 3.5 years of admittance; *lingerers* are students who had completed all/nearly all the required coursework but not their master's theses within 3.5 years of admittance; and *departers* are students who had left the master's program without completing their degrees within 3.5 years of admittance.

Interviews with *lingerers* revealed two additional lingering sub-categories: 1) *pre-thesis proposal lingerers* (students who had not submitted thesis proposals for faculty approval upon completion of required coursework nor at the time of interviews); and 2) *post-thesis proposal lingerers* (students who had approved proposals but had not completed their theses at the time of interviews). The lingering categories particularly represent types of outcomes that are expected to change over time (e.g., *finishers* or *departers*).

Two students were selected from the sampling frame and contacted for in-depth interviews. Selection was based on students' willingness to participate. Additional participants were recruited using snowball sampling techniques.

After conducting four interviews, it became apparent snowball techniques were placing me in contact exclusively with *finishers*. Sampling was adapted to include *lingerers* and *departers* in the study. Recruitment was undertaken via mail.

Letters were sent to all students in the sampling frame (except those already interviewed). The letter described the research interest and included a self-addressed, postage-paid reply card on which participants could indicate willingness to participate in the research (see Appendix C). Participants were given four weeks to respond. They were contacted only if they returned their reply card. Six letters were returned non-deliverable, two participants declined to participate via mail, and 10 students indicated willingness to participate via mail. Of the original 41 students in the sampling frame, 14 were interviewed about their experiences in the master's program. Of these, 4 were finishers, 8 were lingerers, and 2 were departers.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE**

All participants expressed support for study of persistence and dropout in the master's program. However, many also expressed concern about the risks of being identified in this study. To deal with these concerns and ensure confidentiality, I changed potentially identifying features (e.g., names, gender, undergraduate discipline/degree, area of sociological focus, etc.) of the participants and any identifying characteristics of faculty and staff members. Thus, characteristics such as age, race, ethnicity, and gender are not specifically described. However, some broad descriptions of the sample can be made. Participants in this research were overwhelmingly white and female. Their average

age was 34.5 years. Most departers and lingerers were either single or divorced. Nearly all finishers were married. The finishers completed the master's degree in an average of 3 years. Both departers left the program near the end of their first year of enrollment in the program. Other background variables are discussed in the findings chapter of this thesis. This sample is probably not representative of the overall population of sociology master's students at PSU. The findings are based on individual experiences and interactions in the sociology department. The time and the circumstances within the sociology department cannot be regarded as representative of all possible times and circumstances. For such reasons, the findings are context bound and not generalizable to other sociology master's students at PSU.

None of the finishers or departers were interviewed at the time they actually completed their degrees or dropped out from the program. That is, no exit polling was conducted in this research. Lingerers represent the only students who were still occupying their category in this study. Thus, much of the information given by students, along with the results of this research, are based on perceptions of experiences and events that occurred earlier in time. For instance, many students discussed the influence that "time spent in the department" had on their ability to establish relationships with faculty and peers. In conversations about faculty-student relationships, many students reported that they spent "a lot of time" in the department which enabled them to develop close relationships with faculty.

However, in conversations about peer relationships, many of these same students reported that they did not have time to spend with peers, and that this prevented them from developing close relationships with other students. Student recollections of time were unclear, sometimes contradictory and seemingly controlled by the context of the question being asked.

There is also an element of inside observation and bias to this research. I was at the time a master's student conducting research involving my peers. There were advantages and disadvantages associated with this status. First, as an insider, I did not have to work as hard as other researchers might in gaining the trust of these participants. They considered me one who shared in their experience of attending the sociology master's program. However, being involved, I had to be extra sensitive to the possibilities of not hearing and not being able to report the information that students might share or share more accurately with an outsider might. Also, I may be more prone to consciously or unconsciously omit information about student experiences in the analysis of the data. Finally, participants in this study may have knowingly or unknowingly placed themselves in a different light in communicating to me events and circumstances that impacted their experiences relative to the way they would place themselves with an outsider or relative to what is really true. Participants may have exaggerated experiences that could not be verified as accurate. All of these factors introduced elements of bias into the research. By following Witt's research design, I took several

precautions to guard against these and other possible sources of bias while collecting and analyzing the data.

## DATA COLLECTION

I used two data sources in this research. Student profile records (examined with permission of the department) and interviews with students about their experiences. The student profile records included information on participants' undergraduate major, cumulative undergraduate GPA, cumulative master's GPA, and enrollment status upon entry into the master's program.

A semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix B) was developed based on Tinto's models of departure. This was used to fill in information about students experiences. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to discuss their experiences conversationally. The interview questions dealt with experiences and interactions in the program and with life events and circumstances that may have impacted such experiences and interactions.

The interview guide was modified during the research process to confirm and expand information that was obtained during the study. For example, during the first interview, one student reported "feeling needed" while she was a student in the program. This idea was then introduced as a question in subsequent interviews with students with the aim of confirming and expanding on the relationship between



perceptions of "feeling needed" and integration. As the study progressed, questions were added and/or omitted in this manner to enhance clarification.

Three techniques that Witt (1991) recommends were used to guard against interview bias: 1) *peer-debriefing*; 2) *member checks*; and 3) *outside audit*.

***Peer-debriefing:*** This involves getting "feedback from insiders" and colleagues during the research process to guard against bias (Witt 1991). Another graduate student in the sociology master's program particularly served as a peer-debriefer (Ms. Staples). She also helped me to conduct interviews with participants from August 1994 to January 1995--until information about student experiences became repetitive and reached a point of saturation. Ms. Staples and I discussed the phenomena under study (integration and persistence/departure) and our emerging understandings and interpretations of the data obtained from the interviews. Also, a large focus group was conducted to obtain peer-debriefing with the newest batch of sociology master's students. These students provided feedback on the interview guide and suggestions on how concepts might be explored with my participants. These conversations with peers helped make me more aware of my personal perspectives and perceptions about integration, persistence and departure and helped me minimize personal bias.

***Member Checks:*** Participants were interviewed separately. The interviews took place at the university, in restaurants, in people's homes, and in places of employment. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. All interviews were

tape recorded and transcribed by a secretarial service in Portland. Participants were informed that the results of this study would be a master's thesis. Before the start of each interview I discussed the analytical categories under study and the purpose of the research. This is described by Witt as a "member check." Students were informed that all information about themselves would be strictly regarded as confidential and that their participation in the study should be entirely voluntary--that they should feel no pressure from the department or any other source to participate. Potential participants were given a consent form (see Appendix A) which they read and signed before the start of their interview.

Member checks also involve verifying interpretations and conclusions with research participants. In this study, I checked my findings with participants to verify the degree to which my interpretations and conclusions about the data rang true with them.

*Outside Audit:* Advice on qualitative research methods was obtained from two professors at PSU--Dr. Guthrie, a professor in psychology, and Dr. Morgan, a professor in the department of Urban and Public Affairs. Both are experts in qualitative research methods and practices. I also discussed my research with people outside academia to obtain their feedback on this thesis. This is referred to by Witt as an "outside audit."

## ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The interviews were transcribed by a secretarial service in Portland. The information thus recorded was then analyzed as it became available in transcriptions. This allowed me to think about analytical categories and adaption of the interview guide to emergent issues and themes discussed by students.

During the first stage of analysis, each transcription was compared with its recording to ensure that the content of the transcribed texts matched the audio taped recordings as closely as possible. The flavor of the interviews was retained by including all of the unfinished sentences and colloquial phrases such as "you know" or "I dunno" (which frequently appeared at the beginning and/or end of statements) in the transcriptions. These more lengthy verbatim accounts were used during the first two stages of analysis. During the final report writing, the verbatim accounts were edited to ensure clarity and to remove any indications of the identities of the participants.

Procedures for organizing and analyzing data were modeled after Christie and Dinham's (1991) qualitative study of undergraduate persistence and departure. First, the transcriptions were examined to identify specific topics that students discussed in the interviews. Because the interviews explored constructs in Tinto's models, many of topics identified were related to these concepts. Other topics common in many interviews also emerged from the data and were identified as emergent topics. Second, topics were cut from the transcriptions (e.g., cut with

scissors) and divided up into categories. These categories were searched for patterns of experiences that addressed themes in Tinto's models and were organized into sub-categories. Emergent topics were searched for patterns of experiences and organized into emergent sub-categories. For example, a topic labeled "academic integration" was identified under which were classified all passages pertaining to intellectual development and academic involvement with faculty members, staff, and peers that impacted persistence in the master's program. During the first and second stages of analysis, 17 such categories were identified and compiled into files.

During the third phase of organization and analysis, categories under each topic were examined for patterns of experiences that pertained to integration and persistence/departure. These data were organized into sub-categories. For instance, when analysis of data previously organized under the topic "academic integration" revealed information about graduate assistantships and integration, this information was further analyzed to determine the specific ways (i.e., sub-categories) in which graduate assistantships affected social/academic integration and student outcomes. In the final stage of analysis, 17 topics and their sub-categories were compared for similarities. Similar topics were collapsed into core topics and similar categories into core sub-categories. The final product of these procedures generated 3 core topics and 12 core-sub-categories.

Analysis of student records was less involved and comparatively much easier. First, background information on participants was compiled into categories of cumulative undergraduate GPA, cumulative master's GPA, undergraduate major, enrollment status, age, race, gender, and marital status by consulting student profile records. Next, three categories of student outcomes were created: finishers, lingerers, departers. Numerical and non-numerical data were listed under these corresponding categories. The numerical data were averaged (e.g., age, cumulative master's GPA, cumulative undergraduate GPA) and averages between the three groups were examined for similarities and differences. For example the cumulative master's GPA's for finishers were averaged and compared with the cumulative master's GPA's of lingerers and departers to determine whether differences between groups might help to describe patterns of persistence and departure. Non-numerical data (e.g., marital status, undergraduate major) were organized under corresponding categories and then compared by counting.

In sum, the purpose of these methods was to facilitate exploration of integration and how Tinto's models and concepts of persistence and departure apply to an understanding of sociology master's students at PSU. The aim was to describe how students became socially and academically integrated into the master's program and how integration influenced persistence or departure. The aim also was to explore whether attribute variables influenced student outcomes. The findings in the research serve this purpose.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The premise behind this research was to explore how students in the master's program became integrated into the academic and social systems of the sociology department at Portland State University (PSU), and how integration influences student outcomes. This research also explores how background characteristics of master's students and structural characteristics of the sociology department interact and impact student experiences and patterns of persistence and departure. As noted in the previous chapter, conclusions based on characteristics such as age, race, ethnicity, and gender are not specifically addressed in this thesis in order to maintain confidentiality. Participants in this research were overwhelmingly white, female, and about 34 or 35 years old. Other background variables thought to influence student outcomes are discussed in the sections that follow. This research explores the experiences of 4 finishers, 8 lingerers, and 2 departers. Finishers are defined as students who had completed their master's degrees within 3.5 years of admittance; lingerers are students who completed all or nearly all the required coursework but not their master's theses within 3.5 years; and departers are students who permanently left the master's program without completing their master's degrees within 3.5 years of admittance. Interviews with lingerers revealed two additional sub-categories: 1) pre-thesis proposal lingerers (students who had not submitted thesis proposals for faculty

approval upon completion of required coursework nor at the time of interviews); and 2) post-thesis proposal lingerers (students who had approved proposals but had not completed their theses at the time of interviews).

## **INDIVIDUAL SOURCES OF PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE**

### **-Background Variables-**

This research found that enrollment status, undergraduate major, undergraduate GPA, and cumulative graduate GPA had no relationship to persistence, lingering, and departure in the sociology master's program. Nearly all participants had enrolled as full-time students upon entry into the program and maintained full-time status during their stay in the graduate program. Exactly half of the participants had earned undergraduate degrees in sociology, with the other half earning degrees in various undergraduate disciplines in the liberal arts and sciences. Sociology undergraduate majors were approximately equally distributed among the three outcome groups in this study. No significant differences in average cumulative master's GPA existed between the three groups. Departers had slightly higher average cumulative undergraduate GPA's (3.7), followed by finishers (3.5) and lingerers (3.4). The average cumulative master's GPA for finishers, lingerers, and departers was 3.87, 3.85, and 3.88 respectively. The finishers completed their master's degrees in an average of 3 years. Both departers left near the end of their first year of enrollment in the master's program.

### **-Student Goals/Commitments and Persistence-**

The two background variables that most directly influenced patterns of persistence and departure among this sample of master's students were the presence or lack of clear career and educational goals and commitment to degree completion. As previously noted in Tinto's integration model, these variables are important predictors of persistence. In the present research, finishers expressed clear ideas about what they would do with their master's degrees in sociology upon entry into the program. They also expressed commitment to goal of finishing their master's degrees. The majority of these students indicated that they wanted careers in teaching. They saw the master's degree as a form of career preparation or development that would enable them to enter a Ph.D. program and subsequently lead them to a teaching career in a university. For all finishers, the master's degree was seen as a means to an end, either in the form of a teaching career or in a research career. Descriptions from two finishers exemplify these findings:

I had a super instructor as an undergraduate and I was really interested in making that my career. I knew that I loved teaching and so in order to teach, and at first I thought about teaching at a community college, I knew I needed a master's degree. That was really the reason why I decided to get a master's degree in sociology. (M. Finisher)

I wanted to become a researcher. My concept [of a researcher] was kind of hazy, but as I went along and took more research-oriented courses, I more sharply defined what kind of work I wanted to do. I also looked at some of the jobs that were out there and I narrowed my focus to what I wanted to do. Essentially my view starting the program and ending the program were the same. I just became more focused as a result of acquiring knowledge. I wasn't learning for the



sake of learning. Face it, my decisions were more pragmatic and career oriented. (J. Finisher)

The lingerers represented a mixed bag when it came to the presence or lack of career/educational goals and commitment to earning a master's degree. Three lingerers had fairly clear notions about what they would do with their degrees upon entry into the program, each foreseeing themselves as future university professors. The other lingerers indicated that they entered the program for personal growth rather than for specific career development. The remaining two lingerers expressed relatively vague educational/career goals. Three excerpts illustrate these findings:

I liked going to school and I decided that I really wanted a master's degree and at that point in time I knew I wanted to go on for a doctorate to teach. (P. Lingerer)

I was looking for some personal growth and development and an opportunity to use another side of my brain. I just wanted to be a student and study something scholarly. I was thinking of just having the experience and just wanted to study. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I just wanted a different life. (Y. Lingerer)

Initially I didn't have any specific idea what I wanted to do with my degree. I had a vague idea that I wanted to teach, but I didn't know at what level. I knew junior colleges require a master's and universities are Ph.D.s. So, I was thinking about that. But I didn't have any definite ideas when I first came into the program. (Q. Lingerer)

All lingerers in this study expressed a commitment to finishing their master's degrees in sociology. For lingerers, finishing the master's degree involved either finding a thesis topic and/or finding the time to devote to thesis

completion. The thesis represented a major structural barrier to degree completion for both departers and most of the lingerers in this research. This topic will be discussed shortly. Here, it is important to note that it is not simply a question of *whether* lingerers will finish, but rather a question of *when* they will finish.

Excerpts from T. and W. exemplify these findings:

I had moved here a thousand miles and cut my ties. I didn't burn any bridges but I cut my ties. I was committed to going to school. I said, "I'm going to do this." And my thesis is almost finished. I have done all the field research and every single piece of paper has been filed that needs to be filed. All I need to do is finish writing the thesis. So, I'm about as close to the end as you can get. (T. Lingerer)

I'm going to finish because I have clear goals in sight and want to go on for my Ph.D. The only way I can get there is to get a master's with a good GPA and get good recommendations from my thesis committee. I've thought about dropping out and applying to different programs a number of times. But I tell myself, "You've got a goal and you've got to finish." (W. Lingerer)

The departers in this study expressed vague notions about what they would do with their master's degrees in sociology. They indicated an interest in teaching, but neither departer seemed convinced that this was their career calling. Both indicated a lack of commitment with respect to fulfilling their goal of earning a master's degree because they did not have specific career/educational goals upon entry into the program. Three descriptions illustrate these findings:

I wasn't real clear at the onset. I think my goals were pretty nebulous. Part of the reason I entered the program was to get a sense of whether or not I wanted to study sociology. I was thinking

about teaching and I think I had in the back of my mind that I would go on and get a doctorate. I just thought studying sociology would be an interesting thing to do. (Z. Departers).

For me it was a safe place to be for awhile. After graduating from college, there were no real job opportunities so I figured I would go on to graduate school and maybe think of something to do. It seemed like the logical step even though I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life as far as having a career. I wanted to see what this master's stuff was like. You know, "Stay in school, you have nothing really to look forward to. It's hard to find a job, so stay in school." (R. Departers)

I think if I were really motivated to study sociology I would've done it. I would've done it even though I didn't have a lot of money, time, energy. I just wasn't motivated. (Z. Departers)

#### **-Institutional Commitment and Persistence-**

Tinto notes a relationship between commitment to graduating from a specific institution and persistence. No connection between sociology master's student's commitment to the larger institution and persistence was found in the present study.

Nearly all participants reported that their decisions to enter the sociology master's program were based on characteristics of PSU rather than on particular program/departmental characteristics. Finishers, lingerers, and departers reported that they applied to the sociology master's program because PSU was familiar, affordable, and conveniently located. Only one participant (a lingerer) researched other institutions. Only one participant (a finisher) reported doing any extensive research on the master's program in sociology prior to entering into the program. Thus, the characteristics of PSU, and in some cases the City of Portland, seemed to

attract the participants to the master's program, rather than the departmental/program attracting students to the larger institution. Three descriptions illustrate this finding:

I didn't think about other universities or programs. I felt embedded in Portland. I felt like my life and my job were here. PSU fit my lifestyle. My job was at night so I could spend the whole day in school and go back to work at night. And that was a very comfortable life for me. (J. Finisher)

I don't think I looked around a whole lot. It's close and I wanted to go the cheapest way I could. (Z. Departer)

I looked at different colleges. There was PSU, University of Portland, and Lewis and Clark. There was Portland and was Eugene. There was a lot more that Portland offered if I was going to take my kids away from where we were. (O. Lingerer)

## **STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF PERSISTENCE AND DEPARTURE**

### **-Integration and Persistence/Departure-**

Tinto's theoretical models of departure argue that interactive experiences with faculty and peers strengthen student educational/career goals and increase the likelihood of degree completion. In the doctoral model, faculty-student mentoring is viewed as one of the most important components in doctoral degree completion. The present research found that academic and social integration influenced persistence at the master's level. Findings in this research indicate that finishers were more socially and academically integrated within the sociology department than were departers and lingerers. Academic and social integration among this

sample of students were determined through participants' perceptions and descriptions of faculty-student interactions and by the presence of long-term graduate assistantship positions within the sociology department. This research also found connections between mentoring-relationships with faculty and persistence at the master's level. Involvement with peers and amount of time spent in the sociology department also contributed to integration and to subsequent persistence. The findings in this research suggest that the absence of one or more of these factors (i.e., long-term graduate assistantship positions, mentoring, involvement with peers, and time spent in department) impacted integration and influenced cases of departure and lingering. These findings are more fully discussed in the following themes that emerged from the data.

#### **-Interactions with Faculty-**

Research on undergraduates (Mutter 1992; Terenzini and Wright 1987) has indicated that infrequent and/or unsatisfying interactions with faculty members are components in departure. Nearly all the students in this research perceived faculty-student interactions as formal and limited to academic matters. Students in this research indicated that their conversations with faculty were restricted to coursework and thesis work. While descriptions of faculty-student interactions were similar in nature and content among finishers, lingerers, and departers, finishers had more frequent and lasting contact with faculty members. Finishers

seemed largely satisfied with their interactions and relationships with faculty and with their overall experience as students in the master's program. Departers and lingerers seemed less satisfied with their interactions and relationships with faculty and with their overall experiences in the master's program. Faculty-student interactions were commonly described by departers and many lingerers as "hierarchical" and "cold." While the departers did not directly associate their decisions to leave the program with the character of their interactions with faculty, findings in this research suggest that limited and infrequent contact with faculty were ingredients in the process of departure from the master's program. The findings suggest that the more contact students have with faculty members, the more integrated they become in the department and the more positive they feel about their experiences in the master's program. Excerpts from M, Z, Q, and J illustrate how finishers, lingerers, and departers perceived faculty-student interactions:

My interactions with faculty were pretty informal. They were certainly course-related, but I spent more time with faculty as a graduate student than ever before. I've always felt I could talk to any of them. Certainly, like anybody else, you work better with some than with others. (M. Finisher)

There was very little interaction with those professors I was not actively taking classes with. If I was taking a class with them, then maybe I'd go to their office and talk about the coursework. It was always about school work. The only faculty house I've been to was because of the "Welcome aboard party." Other than that, I've never been to their homes. Come to think of it, I've never been off-campus with any of them. I've never met any of them off-campus. They're pretty much my professors. (Q. Lingerer)

Usually when I have conversation with a person it has a purpose. For the most part the interactions I had with professors were on academic matters. They usually applied to something in the department. But, I would say I had a decent relationship with most members in the department. With Dr. G. I had a more vertical relationship where I'm on the bottom. With Dr. S., I felt our relationship was more horizontal. That was not only the way I perceived them, but also the way they liked to perceive faculty-student interactions. It's just the way it worked and it worked out fine for me. (J. Finisher)

The interactions I had were mostly formal. I had a real sense of clarity that they were on one side and students were on the other side. When I did see them, which was pretty infrequently, we talked mostly about coursework. The professors I had when I was in graduate school before really went out of their way to make people feel comfortable. I think I was expecting the same thing when I came to the sociology department. Here, they seemed distant by comparison. So, I never had any close relationships with faculty. In fact, I felt like they were a little on the cold side. (Z. Departar)

### **-Graduate Assistantships and Mentoring-Relationships-**

Findings in this research indicate a connection between graduate assistantship positions, mentoring relationships with faculty, and persistence. All finishers in this study held long-term graduate assistantship positions (one or more academic years) within the department of sociology. They also reported having at least one mentor while they were students in the master's program. The findings suggest a link between teaching assistantship positions and mentoring. Mentoring was described by students as "feeling understood," "having a source of support," "getting encouragement," "having someone to model after," and "feeling connected" with at least one faculty member in the department. Most finishers in

this research reported that mentoring relationships with faculty evolved from working with professors as teaching assistants. In addition, the finishers reported that their mentors "nudged" or encouraged them to finish their master's degrees. Thus, mentoring was found to be another ingredient in the process of persistence. Finally, teaching assistantships provided nearly all finishers with needed financial support. Most finishers did not have to seek employment outside of the department because of the assistantship position. This arrangement enabled them to spend more time in the department. Thus, findings show that teaching assistantships positions linked students to faculty and to financial resources which integrated them into in the social/academic systems of the sociology department. Mentoring relationships, established through assistantship positions, impacted finishers' perceptions of feeling academically and socially integrated into the department and influenced patterns of persistence. Several excerpts from finishers illustrate these findings:

I spent a lot of time in the department and being a teaching assistant helped me because I had to ask a lot of questions about teaching. Dr. G.'s office was just across the hall from mine, so he was ready for me all the time. Of course he had books all around his office and he would pull out something and say, "Read this and you will find it." I think he has always been my first, my number one mentor. I felt free calling him at home and inviting him over. Of course, I have been to his home lots of times. (L. Finisher)

The circumstances made it possible for me to finish. Like if I were too poor to go and nobody else offered me any financial support, I could not have gone into the program. If I were too rich to ask for financial support then I probably would not have gotten the attention that I received from professors in the department. So the



circumstances worked for me. I got all the opportunities and attention I needed and I went through with it and finished. (L. Finisher)

One of the things that helped me early on was that I worked as an assistant in a research course. Getting in and actually working with students helped build my confidence. I felt like it was something I could do. Second, it gave me a chance to work with faculty members very closely. When I was teaching, Dr. G. would say, "You just did this stuff, here's what you want to do, and here's how you do it." He had a way of standing back and letting me do stuff and making me feel like I was on my own when I really wasn't if I needed back-up. It really did give me a chance to start seeing faculty members as people, not just as professors. (M. Finisher)

I was not only given, but sought out positions of responsibility within the department. I carved out a niche that was given to me and also carved out a niche for myself here. Because I was a T.A. people would come to me and ask questions. They'd come to me if Dr. S. wasn't around. So, I had a role. And along with that role I had a certain power with that, and it was a nice feeling to feel needed. That's a good feeling when you're feeling useful. Personally it was good for me and hopefully I benefitted some students along the way. (J. Finisher)

J and M describe how encouragement from their mentors helped them to complete their master's degrees in sociology:

Dr. S. was pressuring me to finish. I really deserved it. She thought I might be slacking off or getting a little peeved about my thesis. But she reminded me that it was "thesis time." You know, you remind your kids that it's nap time. Well it was "thesis time." (J. Finisher)

There came a point when I was trying to finish my thesis and I hit a wall. I had all the data sitting there and I just couldn't bring myself around to do it. Dr. G. was certainly there nudging me and my husband was always there to help. That was a really hard time. The support of my husband, Dr. S. and Dr. G. basically prevented me from dropping out. (M. Finisher)

Of the departers, only R held a graduate assistantship position on a short-term basis (one quarter or less). Neither R nor Z reported having mentors. Z reported that she did not establish a mentoring-relationship for personal reasons. R concluded that he was never able to establish a mentoring-relationship because he lacked a thesis topic. For R, the thesis was viewed as a stepping stone for more involvement with faculty:

I didn't have a mentor because I wasn't to that point because I didn't have a thesis topic. I had ideas about what I wanted to do but I was never set on a thesis topic. There were professors that I thought I might have on my committee once I got a topic together. And then they would be my mentors. Then they would guide me. That's how I would see myself in that relationship. (R. Departer)

I don't think I had a mentor. When I think of a mentor I think of person that you're devoted to almost. I tend to stay away from that kind of stuff. But I would have been happier if I had a more personal relationship with some of the faculty or least felt more welcomed or assisted. (Z. Departer)

Five of the eight lingerers held long-term graduate assistantship positions within the sociology department. Like the departers, none of the lingerers reported having a mentor. Two lingerers reportedly did not want mentors, three lingerers were unable to establish mentoring-relationships with faculty because they felt professors did not extend themselves to students, and the final three reported that work and family responsibilities kept them away from the department, subsequently preventing them from developing such relationships with faculty. The following excerpts illustrate these findings:

I understand that it is encouraged here, but I would probably say that I didn't want a mentor. I know I'm probably committing academic suicide when I say that, but it's just my personal thing. (Q. Lingerer)

It doesn't matter if there's a sense of community. That would be Utopia. There's no connectedness. At least for people who don't finish. There's no sense of mattering. If I were to drop out at any point, no one would call and ask, "What happened to you? Is there something we can do to bring you back?" No, they just fill the slot with someone else. Mentoring is the word that keeps coming back. There is no mentorship. (Y. Lingerer)

When I came into the program I thought I made my interests known to the person who seemed to be involved in that area of sociology. So I felt that I tried to send up cue cards that said, "Yeah, I'd like to study with you." I felt I did that a number of times and never really got anything in return. It was never reciprocated. So, I decided not to pursue that area and not to pursue that person as a result of my lousy cue card experience. I expected to do the ground work with professors and then develop some kind of relationship based on that, but it never happened. (D. Lingerer)

It's not like when I go there they don't recognize me, but I really don't know them. The only time I really saw them was in class or to turn something in. But as far as having a mentor or something, no. I never really felt a part of stuff at PSU because I'm not there and I don't get involved in anything outside of class. I guess I really feel integrated in other parts of my life, my family, friends, church whatever. School is a place I go and do and I don't have time for the fun stuff. (O. Lingerer)

#### **-Peer Relationships and Persistence/Departure-**

Findings in the present study suggest that involvement with peers is an important factor in integration and in persistence at the master's level. Most participants reported that peer relationships were restricted to the environs of PSU.

Yet, all finishers reported that having close relationships with members of their cohort and the peer support/encouragement positively impacted that experiences as students in the program. However, the extent of peer relationships on persistence is difficult to determine. Only one finisher reported that peer support had a direct impact on final degree completion. Findings in the present research indicate that peer support has more of an impact on student decisions to re-enroll in sociology classes term after term rather than directly influencing student outcomes. The indirect role that peer relationships have on persistence seems to relate to findings on impact of work and family responsibilities on student integration. Work and family responsibilities were found to limit the amount of time students could spend with peers both on and off-campus. External sources of persistence and departure will be discussed shortly. What is important here is to note the integrative nature of peer relationships and their perceived importance on the overall process of persistence. The following excerpts illustrate such perceptions:

I was lucky to be with a group of graduate students who were motivated, who were there all the time, who were involved. It seems like we all knew what each other was doing and offered each other lots of support and advice. My office mate and I became good friends. It was like involvement there. I think that people in my cohort were a little older than me so I felt this older sister and brother relationship with them. They were very supportive. (L. Finisher)

I think we were a tight knit group. The difference is that two of us, myself and U, moved through the program very quickly. The other students in my cohort didn't do that for various reasons. So our directions and approaches were a little different. But U and I got through our theses about the same time. I think she was an

important support system, especially during the coursework when we were in close contact. (M. Finisher)

I developed friendships. Our cohort was made up of a couple of groups of students in the program. This guy V and I became friends outside of class. We went to the faculty parties together. There were three or four of us who became pretty close and went through all the classes together and studied together. (K. Finisher)

Most of the lingerers and one of the departers reported that they also felt a sense of membership within a student cohort and that involvement with peers was an important factor of social and academic integration. Most of these students reported that they shared the common experience of attending graduate school with members of their cohort. Sharing in a common experience or "being in the same boat" enabled these students to "bond" and endure the more difficult aspects of graduate school. Like finishers, work and family responsibilities prevented most lingerers and departers from socializing with peers off-campus. However, findings indicate that for most lingerers and departers, interactions and relationships with peers were more integrative than relationships and interactions with faculty members. Several excerpts illustrate these findings:

I made friendships, but they were friendships that were pretty much confined to the school community. I wasn't there long enough to form any life-lasting friendships. But I felt like we were all in the same boat as far as being graduate students and wanting to learn more about sociology and improve ourselves. That was a strong glue. I felt more bonded to my fellow graduate students while I was there. I got more support from them, from being in the same boat with a lot of them, than bonding with the faculty. (R. Departer)

I remember spring term in Dr. G.'s class somebody saying, "I feel so alienated!" All of the sudden everybody was saying, "Yeah, me too!" Then I felt like it wasn't just me. Up until then I felt totally outside of everybody else. (O. Lingerer)

When you consider that we worked so hard to get here, that for people to leave because of the department or because they're too stressed out just seems a shame. I remember when another student was going to drop out. He was so stressed out about all sorts of stuff. I didn't know what to say except, "Just hang in there. We're all trying to keep our heads above water." (Q. Lingerer)

I feel more comfortable talking to other students because we're all going through the same thing at similar points in time. Because I work outside, I'm here mostly for my classes and otherwise in the library, but never in the department. My extent of dealing with the faculty has been when I have questions about my thesis. (W. Lingerer)

The one good thing that came out of it, and it came out because we had no faculty support, was that we developed a cohort. We came together and formed study groups. We worked together, we played together and we became really good friends during that time. We have all sort of blown apart now. So that circumstance brought us together and helped us a lot. We worked and supported each other in the classes and we knew we were there for each other when the faculty wasn't. (Y. Lingerer)

One instance of departure (Z) appears to be linked to perceived feelings of isolation from peers and disillusionment with the master's program:

There were a number of students in my classes who had been in the school and even who knew each other as undergraduates. But at least they knew the school. The school was new to me and I felt that I didn't know why I was there or if I was going to stay. That made me feel a little isolated and I also feel like I was isolating myself because I didn't know what I was getting into. I was tip-toeing into it rather than diving in. It was like new territory and I wasn't sure if I was going to stay. (Z. Departer)

### **-Student Networking of Information-**

Student networking of information was a common theme that emerged from the data about peer-relationships among lingerers. Nearly all lingerers reported that they learned about program resources and procedures through members of their cohort and through graduate students further along in the program. Student networking of information was the most common way for lingerers to learn about program operations. Analysis of statements about the allocation of departmental resources indicated a lack of formal procedure for awarding teaching assistantships and office space to master's students. Three finishers, four lingerers and one departer reported that professors "sought them out" for teaching assistantship positions. One finisher and one lingerer reportedly applied for assistantship positions. Another lingerer reportedly "went after it" until a professor "put it together" for him. Most students in this research had "no clue" how office space was allocated among students. For many lingerers, arbitrary or "mysterious" assignment of departmental resources created feelings of anxiety and normelssness. Student networking of information reportedly made up for the departmental deficiencies in information sharing. The following excerpts illustrate these findings:

I don't remember any sharing of information from the office itself. It was students further along in the program who would help us and tell us what to do. There were students who had gotten offices who said, "Hey, you can get an office too if you're teaching." I don't think things were ever offered. I received an assistantship as there

was a need. I learned about things from other students. (Y. Lingerer)

It's like nobody makes you aware of anything. I had no idea that I even had a mailbox there until four weeks into my first term. I didn't know you could go ask for an office until the end of my first year. They don't make anything available. It's like you have to know somebody who was there the year before who tells you about it. (H. Lingerer)

I remember students further along in the program who had TAs. It all seemed very mysterious. I had no idea what a TA did, but I knew they got their own classes and I really wanted to do that but I had no idea how. Somebody asked Dr. S. about it in a class and basically got no answer. I remember feeling like I was either going to have to fight to get an office or TAs or that it was going to be some frenzy where everyone would have to compete for those things. (D. Lingerer)

I remember hearing that Dr. S. told somebody who told somebody who told C who told U that we could all get offices. (W. Lingerer)

### **-The Thesis Process and Lingerer/Departure-**

Findings in this research suggest that thesis writing is a major obstacle to master's degree completion and is a significant source of source of lingering and dropout from the sociology master's program. Both departers reported that the lack of a thesis topic influenced their decisions to leave the master's program. In addition, the perceived lack of a thesis topic prevented most lingerers and departers from establishing mentoring-relationships with faculty members. Findings already suggest a connection between mentoring and persistence. None of the departers or lingerers in this research had mentors. In addition, lingerers in the pre-proposal stage of thesis writing reported that they did not understand the thesis writing



process. They attribute this lack of understanding to an absence of shared information between faculty and students about thesis writing procedures. Lingering at the post-proposal stage of thesis writing is attributed to a lack of time, lack of focus, and to a desire to produce the "perfect thesis." Post-proposal lingerers also report diminished contact with faculty during the thesis writing process. Thus, findings on the thesis process indicate a connection between the lack of a thesis topic, lack of integration (as indicated by the absence of mentoring-relationships) and lingering/departure. Excerpts from interviews with Z, R, O, P, W, and Y illustrate these findings:

I don't think professors were interested in what I wanted to do because I had no idea what I was going to do. I knew I didn't have a thesis topic and I just figured that either I'll get comfortable here and I'll get one or I won't stay. (Z. Departer)

I never felt isolated here. I liked the students and I liked the faculty too. Leaving was a decision I based on a combination of things. I had a hard time ever deciding what I would do for my thesis and that was a big issue for me. Another part of it was looking to the future and asking, "What do you do when you work on a thesis and where does that get you?" as opposed to "What kind of experience will a job give me?" I made the decision to work for a while and see how that paid off. (R. Departer)

If I could just get an idea of what to do, I would at least be able to talk with people. If I knew what my research question was going to be, but I just block it out. I just can't seem to get into it. I think if I could just get my head started on it, then I know there are people I know I could go to and find out what to do next. It's just getting going on it and having the time to get it done. (O. Lingerer)

My own experience is that nobody that I know has really had a lot of contact with faculty during the thesis process. You go to them with stuff and then they'll work with you. But if you don't show up,

things don't get started or finished. I also want this to be the best damned thesis that ever came out of that department. And that's self-defeating. Maybe you shouldn't invest so much into it, which is very counter to my belief system. (P. Lingerer)

All along it's been like stumbling. I grabbed U and said, "Here read this and tell me what you think." Then Dr. G. asked me how my thesis was coming along and I said, "Well I've got no idea if it's right or if it's wrong because nobody is telling anybody how to do anything." She seemed pretty resigned to the fact that that's how things work. (W. Lingerer)

I'm looking forward to doing my thesis. I'm really interested in the material and the topic. It's just turned out to be a bigger job than I expected. If there were more mentorship like, "How do you write a thesis? What's it supposed to look like? Help me through this!" There's a lot of help I need and I don't know where to get it. (Y. Lingerer)

## **EXTERNAL SOURCES OF PERSISTENCE/DEPARTURE**

### **-Employment, Integration and Persistence/Departure-**

Tinto's theoretical models note the impact of external demands such as finances, work and family responsibilities on the process of persistence. Nearly all students in this study noted the financial strains of attending graduate school. Findings in this research also indicate that financial circumstances and changes in employment status directly influenced the two instances of departure from the sociology master's program. Both departers held part-time jobs in the private sector to finance their educations at PSU. Their employment status changed to full-time status near the time of their departures from the master's program. Both indicated that a costs-benefit analysis of continuing their educations impacted their

decisions to depart. Changes in employment status also influenced cases of lingering. All lingerers were employed part or full-time in private sector jobs and/or in assistantship positions in the sociology department or in other branches of the university. The employment status of many lingerers changed to full-time employment in private sector jobs near the time that they completed the required coursework for a master's degree. All finishers worked as part-time teaching assistants in the sociology program while enrolled in the program. Two finishers held part-time jobs in the private sector in addition to their teaching duties on campus. Findings indicate that work responsibilities limited the amount of time students could spend in the department, subsequently impacting perceptions of integration. This was particularly true among departers and lingerers who were employed outside the department. The following excerpts illustrate how the combination of financial and employment demands impact student integration and persistence, lingering, and departure at the master's level:

I paid for my undergraduate degree by working part-time and living at home. As a graduate student it was more expensive and I wasn't working enough. I wasn't going to work full-time and go to school full-time like some students. So I took out a loan the first year of graduate school. I just didn't want to take out another loan especially since I didn't know what my thesis was on and what I doing. No specific event turned me off from the department. It was a financial aspect. I didn't want to rack up any more student loans to have to pay back. I wanted to try to work for awhile and see where that got me, with the idea that I might go back. (R. Departer)

I didn't have enough money to meet my expenses so our joint finances changed. My boyfriend ended up paying more than his share and some of my share of the expenses. Then I got real busy

with school and realized that if I worked more hours that I couldn't put the time into the school work that I wanted to. So finances was a big reason for not continuing. I'm real conscientious about having somebody else pay my way and at the same time I'm real conscientious of my school work. So, there wasn't enough time and money. (Z. Departer).

When I started graduate school I was working about 20 to 30 hours a week. Now I'm working more like 40-45 hours. It comprises everything. My job and my kids keep me from being at school and also from studying or from doing a good job on school work. I can write and I'm smart, I know how to figure things out. I just don't have the time to get stuff done and demonstrate that sometimes. It takes so much time and energy to finish and when you've got other things pulling on you, it's hard to do. (O. Lingerer)

Because of my husband's income, I wasn't qualified for financial aid anywhere. So that put quite a strain on the family budget, in terms of not just committing time, but also committing money to education. All the way through my education we had to scrape it up. We managed not to borrow, but it's been real tough. (M. Finisher)

### **-Childcare, Integration and Persistence/Lingering-**

Family responsibilities--in particular childcare demands-- were found to limit participation in the program for three lingerers and two finishers. The responsibilities of raising and caring for children, coupled with employment demands, placed time constraints on these students and impacted their perceptions of feeling integrated in the master's program. Findings also indicate that lingering may be attributed to the combination of work and childcare responsibilities in that such demands limit the time that these students can devote to thesis writing and subsequent degree completion. All of the lingerers in this research were either

single, in unmarried relationships, or divorced. Lingerers with children were responsible for the financial and emotional aspects of childcare. Both of the finishers who had children were married and reportedly received support from their spouse for childcare responsibilities. Thus, childcare responsibilities were found to impact integration among single-parent lingerers. O's "typical day" exemplifies these findings:

There were really severe time constraints. I was trying to get up without enough sleep, get the kids off to school and get to school. It would depend on what the schedule was for work and school. Usually I would go to work and leave work, rush into downtown and try to park, get to classes late, leave class immediately and feel like I was to only person who didn't know everybody. I didn't hang out. It seemed like everybody else would talk about doing stuff and seeing each other and things. Then I would go back to work. It's like time pressure, that's the main thing. There are all the home things that need to be done, like shopping because we don't have food, cooking because we need to eat. Stuff that has to get done. By the time that's all done and the kids are in bed, it's ten o'clock. If I'm moving and doing housework, I can stay up, but when I sit down to study, it's usually all over and I fall asleep. It's like a really rushed, pressured day. (O. Lingerer)

#### **-Support from Significant Others and Persistence-**

Tinto's models view support (financial and emotional) and encouragement from significant others as playing a role in the process of persistence. Findings in this research suggest that support and encouragement from family members and friends are components in the overall process of persistence. Three of the four finishers were married while enrolled in the master's program. All of these three reported that their spouses supported their efforts to earn master's degrees in

sociology, especially in the latter stages of thesis completion. Two finishers reported that their decisions to obtain master's degrees were based on parental expectations to be "well-educated." Fulfillment of perceived parental expectations for a college education played some role in the process of persistence with these two students. The two departers also reported receiving support from significant others (e.g., partner, parent) in their efforts to earn master's degrees. Among the diverse grouping of lingerers, nearly all reported that friends, partners, family members (especially their children) supported their efforts. Thus, emotional support was found to be an important component behind decisions to enter and re-enroll in the master's program for lingerers and departers. Finishers reported that the support of significant others (coupled with individual motivation) had a direct impact on their ability to complete their master's degrees. Several excerpts illustrate how the support of significant others motivated finishers to complete their master's degree in sociology:

My family has always been very, very supportive. My parents and my parents-in-law and my wife. She was always very helpful, doing the housework so I didn't have to do that much. She didn't realize the process would last for more than two years. And I always believed in education. I was born with that in my blood. My parents always pounded that idea into me. (L. Finisher)

I had a very supportive spouse and that made all the difference. He was the one that suggested I go back to school in the first place because he knew something was missing from my life, even though I loved my children and being with them. There was something missing. So he suggested that I go back and try school. So I started back part-time and then fell in love with it again and knew that was what I wanted to do. He was supportive all the way. He also has a

home business in addition to his job. So he dedicated a lot of that money to it. Also he tried to help as much as he could around the house. All the times that I was at my lowest, he was always a source of moral support. (M. Finisher).

Getting the degree was not the end of the process for me. It was a step toward a larger path. I was determined. There was some conflict in my family because we were concerned about the effect of being in school. That was a sore point until I was able to show it was something that I could support myself with, that it would be something that wouldn't just suck or finances. After that the support of my family made all the difference in the world. I can't imagine going through all it took to get the degree without their support. (K. Finisher)

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

The main purpose of this research was to explore how student perceptions of their experiences in the master's program indicate persistence and departure. To this end, the aim was to determine how qualitative analysis of student perceptions of experiences corresponded with the propositions of Tinto's models of persistence. Many of the findings in the research fit well with Tinto's concepts. The findings support the notion that persistence is a complex process that involves interplay between individual and institutional components. The results indicate that perceived presence of social and academic integration (involvement with faculty and peers) influences student experiences and subsequent outcomes in the sociology master's program at PSU. The research found that some students had less access to involvement with faculty and peers as a result of family, work, and financial responsibilities. Prolonged integration was not achieved by these students. External factors also were found to impact student perceptions of integration and directly influenced instances of departure and lingering. The study also found that structural characteristics of the department made integration into the social/academic life of the program more possible for some students than for others. Such integration was especially the case for the group of finishers. The research found that finishers had more access to departmental resources and had more contact with faculty than did most lingerers and departers. In short, they



were identified as the most integrated category of students in this research. In the following sections these findings are discussed in more detail.

#### **-Persistence at the Master's Level-**

Degree completion in this study was best described with the concepts in Tinto's doctoral model of persistence/departure. In this model, persistence is influenced by individual career/educational goals and commitment to degree completion. Persistence is viewed as a product of positive interactions and experiences with members of the local academic community (e.g., faculty and peers). Integrative experiences with faculty and peers reinforce educational/career goals and student commitment to degree completion. The constructs of social and academic integration were exemplified in this research through the presence of graduate assistantships and faculty mentoring. Mentoring and graduate assistantships have been used as operational definitions of integration in other studies on doctoral persistence (Cook and Swanson 1978; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Van Stone et al 1994; Smith and Davidson 1992; Ethington and Pisani 1993). In the present research, perceptions and descriptions of faculty-student interactions and relationships were found to influence integration and persistence among finishers.

The long-term teaching assistantship (more than one academic term) was found to be the vehicle for integration within the faculty community of the

sociology program and department. It provided students with financial support necessary for enrollment, educational, and living expenses. As a result, these students were not as compelled to seek outside employment which enabled them to remain on-campus. Second, the duties of the assistantship required that finishers spend time with faculty planning and discussing classes which facilitated involvement and legitimized integrated status through the award of the assistantship position. Involvement with faculty as assistants also allowed finishers to develop professional skills (e.g., teaching, computer skills) and mentoring relationships with faculty. Findings in this research show that mentoring had direct bearing on the career outcomes of three of the four finishers. These students reported that they secured jobs upon degree completion as a result of recommendations supplied by their mentors. Finishers reported that degree completion was strongly influenced by the support and encouragement they received from their mentors, supporting similar findings by Smith and Davidson (1991) on mentoring and persistence among African American doctoral students.

It should also be noted that three of the four finishers reported that involvement with peers influenced persistence in the form of re-enrollment in the program during their first year, supporting similar findings on the importance of peer support on persistence by Attanasi (1989), Christie and Dinham (1991), and Stage (1989b). However, in the present study, the data suggest that final degree completion was most strongly connected to perceived involvement with faculty

members. Finishers became involved with faculty through assistantship positions which helped to integrate them into the social/academic system of the department. Rewards important for continuance and completion accompanied the assistantship position: 1) financial support; 2) social/academic integration; 3) mentoring; 4) professional development; and 5) recommendations/referrals. The combined effects of these factors reinforced finishers' educational/careers goals and their commitment to graduate. The effects of assistantship positions/mentoring and their influence on integration and persistence elaborate the importance of faculty-student relationships, a key component in Tinto's doctoral model of persistence.

#### **-Departure at the Master's Level-**

Tinto's doctoral model also explained the process of departure in this research. There is some suggestion that perceived lack of mentoring or guidance from faculty contributed to departure in this study, supporting similar findings on departure by Cook and Swanson (1978) and Girves and Wemmerus (1988). Both instances of departure in the present research were explained by the combination of unclear educational/career goals, isolation/incongruence, and financial strain.

According to the doctoral model, the process of persistence is marked by three distinct stages: 1) transition; 2) candidacy; and 3) completion. During the first year of graduate school referred as the transition stage, persistence is influenced by individual career/educational goals and integrative experiences with

faculty and peers. Gaining membership into the academic/social community is viewed as crucial during this stage. Students who do not gain membership may develop feelings of isolation and incongruence and may depart. In the present research, both departures occurred during the transition stage, supporting similar findings by Cook and Swanson (1978). Both departers (Z and R) directly attributed their reasons for leaving the master's program to: 1) lack of thesis topics; 2) full-time employment; and 3) lack of commitment. In addition, they perceived their educational/career goals as "nebulous" or unclear. For R, the lack of a thesis topic prevented him from developing relationships with faculty. He reportedly felt more "bonded" to other students than he did to professors. Z revealed that she felt isolated in the program and also "isolated herself" from her peers. Neither R nor Z reported having mentors or long-term teaching assistantship positions while enrolled in the program. There is also evidence to suggest that R and Z felt their goals were not compatible with the goals and general orientation of the master's program, also described by Tinto as incongruence, a symptom of mal-integration.

There's another thing about leaving that's kind of hard to articulate, but I'll try. The program didn't seem real meaningful to me. It seemed beside the point, and I don't mean beside everybody's point, but beside the point of where I wanted to go with my life. It's hard for me to say exactly what I was looking for, but I started to feel like this was not it. Maybe a lot of that was the real focus on research, especially quantitative research, which seemed like a trivial way to spend your time. I was looking for a broad overview, and I feel like I wasn't getting that. (Z. Departure)

With the school and this department, and the things that they teach you, it's like you're still left wondering, "Well, what am I going to

do once I'm done?" And in talking to people who are in the department, it's either you just keep going and get your master's and then get your doctorate and then maybe there'll be something out there. There's a general idea that a master's degree in sociology may not really get you anywhere. It's not defined of what you're going to do. It's not a definite skill. My choice was to work, and through work I've found more of an opportunity to find a skill. (R. Departar).

In sum, the doctoral model would argue that neither departer (R or Z) gained sufficient access into the social/academic systems of the master's program because neither student perceived their goals as compatible with those of the program. In addition, neither was able to establish meaning relationships with faculty (R) or peers (Z). Their descriptions and perceptions of their experiences confirm that these factors contributed to their decisions to depart. Conversations with R and Z revealed that each conducted a costs-benefits analysis of continued enrollment in the program and concluded that full-time employment was the better option. Although R and Z reported that their decisions to leave were based on financial considerations, their response to specific questions about participation and involvement suggest that more integrative experiences in the program would probably have strengthened their aspirations for degree completion, supporting similar findings about mal-integration and departure (Cook and Swanson 1978; Mutter 1992; Girves and Wemmerus 1988; Pascarella et al 1978; Stage 1989a; Stage 1989b; Ethington and Pisani 1993).

### **-The Process of Linging-**

The doctoral model also provided some explanation behind the process of lingering. In the present research, most cases of lingering were explained by isolation and/or work and/or family responsibilities. While all lingerers had completed all or nearly all required master's coursework, two categories of lingerers emerged from this study: 1) pre-proposal lingerers; and 2) post-proposal lingerers. The former refers to students who had not submitted thesis proposals for faculty approval at the time of interviews, while the latter refers to student who had approved proposals but had not completed their theses at the time of interviews.

Cases of pre-proposal lingering occurred during the stage of candidacy, when students are completing required coursework and exams. According to the doctoral model, persistence here is likely influenced by individual ability and skill. All pre-proposal lingerers in this research demonstrated the skill and ability needed to succeed academically in the master's program (as established through examination of their cumulative master's GPA scores). Students in this sub-category reportedly felt unclear about the thesis writing process. They perceived a lack of guidance from faculty on how to write a thesis. These lingerers relied on peer networking of information to find out about thesis writing and availability of departmental resources such assistantship positions and office space. In present study, social/academic integration with peers was found to influence persistence among pre-proposal lingerers in the form of re-enrollment into the program term

after term. Based on responses to questions about faculty-student interactions/relationships, these students perceived a limited degree of integration with faculty members. Those with teaching assistantships felt more connected to the department than those without. None in this sub-category reported having mentors. Roughly half reported that the responsibilities of work and family life prevented them from becoming involved in the department.

The cases of post-proposal lingering occurred during the stage of completion, described in the doctoral model as the time when students conduct, complete, and defend their thesis research. According to the model, persistence at this stage is dependent upon the type(s) of relationships students have with their advisors and committee members. Persistence is also impacted by external factors such as family, work, and finances.

In the present research, external factors were also reported as cause for lack of degree completion. Most reported that work, family and/or financial commitments took time and focus away from thesis completion. None of these lingerers had mentors, but nearly all had assistantship positions either in the sociology department or in some other department on campus. Most of these lingerers reported some connection with faculty through their work as teaching assistants, and with peers while actively taking classes in the program.

As with finishers and pre-proposal lingerers, peer support was an important factor behind post-proposal lingerers' decisions to re-enroll in the program.

However, all reported that contact with faculty and peers diminished during the thesis writing stage. In addition, these students described the thesis process as a lonely and "isolating" experience. All post-proposal lingerers and one finisher attributed delayed degree completion in part to a lack of guidance and support from thesis committee members.

The thesis is hard to finish. I feel like I could've gotten it done a lot sooner if somebody would've given me a phone call. I had lots of contact with them because I was still in the department taking classes. But it didn't seem to be a priority for anybody besides me. It was like everybody was caring and supportive when you take classes, but when it comes to the thesis, you are on your own. That's very scary for many people. They don't seem to take the thesis very seriously. (L. Finisher)

If there were more of a mentor relationship like, "How do you write a thesis? What are you supposed to do? What is it supposed to look like? Help me through this! Help me get focused!" There's a lot of help I need and I don't know where to get it and I'm going through that myself. (Y. Lingerer)

It is important to note that in the Tinto doctoral model, persistence at the completion stage is idiosyncratic. Students are working with a very small group of faculty members and the features of this small group of people are large factors in completion. The present research did not uncover features of thesis committees that might relate to instances of persistence, lingering or departure. The object of the research was to explore student experiences, not to evaluate thesis committee conduct.



It is not the responsibility of faculty members alone to integrate students into a master's program. Students must make themselves available and otherwise exert effort to accomplish integration. The findings on lingering suggest that perceived isolation is a factor delaying degree completion. It is difficult to predict the outcome of all lingerers in this research, as each expressed commitment to ultimately completing their master's degrees.

The findings on lingering suggest that involvement with peers is crucial during the first two stages of persistence, supporting similar findings on the importance of peer support and persistence by other researchers (Attansi 1989; Stage 1989b; Christie and Dinham 1991).

A small group of lingerers reported that their expectations for integrative experiences within the sociology department were low due to characteristics of PSU. According to these lingerers, the campus environment of PSU was not conducive to integration because it is an urban/commuter school. These students viewed PSU as an education factory where students and faculty appeared, punched a time card, and then left to attend to other commitments and obligations. Thus, there is some suggestion that for a small number of students, expectations for integration were low to begin with, making integrative attempts by faculty difficult or unlikely.

I don't want to sound rude and I'm not degrading my own school here, but this is Portland State. I sure knew it wouldn't be the same as the University of Washington or Michigan or whatever. But I did

expect to see a little bit of an intellectual community. Not, however, a community of scholars. (Q. Lingerer)

I don't know if there's really that much that the university provides. I think my first incarnation as a college student, I went away to college, lived in a dorm, signed in and out, had a house mother and all that. Things have changed tremendously and we still have myths about what it is to be a college student and what a campus is supposed to be. Certainly there are places that will fulfill that. But I don't think a university placed in an urban setting will do that. (P. Lingerer)

I thought it would be pretty similar to how it is based on the fact that it's an urban commuter school and it's not a Ph.D. program. I think I anticipated what I got. I guess I didn't anticipate how much work I would have to do to feel integrated. It was like we all have to really to do the work if we wanted to do anything social or just hang out with the professors. (H. Lingerer)

#### **-Life Events/Circumstances and Persistence-**

In Tinto's doctoral model, the process of persistence can be delayed by external demands such as work, family, financial responsibilities. These factors can limit student participation in the program, and can cause departure. Findings in this research support this proposition. Nearly all students in this research noted the financial strains of attending school. Family responsibilities and tight work schedules limited the time many students could spend in the department. This restricted integration with faculty and peers. Financial concerns were reported as direct influences on the two instances of departure, supporting similar findings by other researchers (Cabrera et al 1992; Andrieu and St. John 1993). Changes in employment status, from part-time to full-time, influenced the amount of time

students could devote to thesis completion, which led to instances of post-proposal lingering. These findings extend Tinto's doctoral model by elaborating on the role that finances and employment status play in the process of persistence/departure.

The findings also suggest that significant others (e.g., spouses, partners, children, parents, friends) can both facilitate and hinder persistence at the master's level. In the present study, finishers reported that significant others supported their educational endeavors by providing emotional support/encouragement, financial assistance, and by sharing in household and childcare responsibilities. Three of the four finishers stated that support from significant others was crucial to their degree completion. Lingerers and departers also received support from family members, their children, and their partners. These findings support similar findings by Van Stone, Nelson and Neimann (1994) on the importance of support/encouragement from family members in the process of persistence, whether it be in the form of continued enrollment or in actual degree completion.

However, there is evidence in the present research that relationships with significant others can also prevent students from fully participating in the master's program. For example, the financial and emotional responsibilities of single-parenthood reportedly prevented O (lingerer) from becoming integrated with faculty and peers. One departer (Z) reportedly based some of her decision to leave the program on the financial and emotional strain that school placed on her relationship with her boyfriend. Dating may have played a role in R's decision not to remain

in the program. These findings support Christie and Dinham's (1994) findings on the dual role that significant others can play in the process of persistence/departure.

When I was working full-time and going to school full-time, it took a lot of time and energy. I felt like I didn't have enough time to clean my house, I didn't have enough time to spend with my boyfriend, and I didn't have enough time for myself. The time factor wasn't a real negative factor in our relationship, it was just frustrating for me not to have the time and energy. (Z. Departure)

I also met somebody halfway into that term. So I started spending time with that person. That lasted awhile, so I started screwing around a lot, not studying when I should have been. I got my stuff done. But that could be a possible contributor to why I didn't go on. It wasn't a major one. (R. Departure)

## **LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

Before discussing the implications of this research, it is important to note its limitations. First, the findings in this research are restricted to the finishers, lingerers, and departers in a particular time, place, and program. The total sample is small and is not representative of master's students in a general population nor of the larger segment of the American population. Indeed, the findings are limited to a sample of 14 individuals enrolled in a large, public, urban, commuter school. The findings do not include differences between student experiences based on age, gender, race, or ethnicity. The research is based on individual experiences in the sociology master's program at PSU: the findings are thus context bound and are not representative of other sociology master's programs. The three categories of

student outcomes (finishers, lingerers, departers) are not representative of all the variety of outcomes that can occur in a student population. The lingering category, while interesting in itself, leaves open how it represents either completion or dropout. Follow-up, perhaps over an extended period of time, is needed to determine which characteristics in the lingering category are most indicative of completion, and which are most indicative of dropout. The small number of participants constituting the finishers category (four) and the departers category (two) clearly limits the findings on persistence and departure.

A purpose of this research was to explore how Tinto's theories, models, and concepts of integration and persistence and departure apply to a qualitative analysis of sociology master's students. The findings satisfy this purpose and provide some insight into the processes of persistence and departure as theorized in Tinto's undergraduate and doctoral models. Analysis of the data indicated that several mediating variables influenced the process of continuance, completion, and dropout. The sampling procedures in this research introduced an intermediate condition to that of persistence and departure--"lingering"-- This condition adds an additional dimension to Tinto's model.

While there are obvious limitations to this study, there also are important implications. First, more research is needed to explore the findings on the relationship between teaching assistantship positions, mentoring and persistence at the master's level, and the results of this study suggest how that research should be

designed. The study did not include the experiences of finishers who did not have teaching assistantships and/or mentoring. Such finishers reasonably do exist, but simply were not sampled.

Additional studies are needed to examine perceived lack of involvement with faculty and peers and instances of departure. There is some suggestion in this research that quantity of time spent with faculty was more important to student perceptions of integration than quality of time spent with faculty, but the data are not sufficient to make this point. The observation is based on consistent descriptions among finishers, lingerers, and departers about formal and limited faculty-student interactions. Additional studies would be useful in determining whether as time with faculty increases, quality held constant, there is positive influence on experiences and subsequent outcomes.

Third, there is a need for more research on the external factors that influence departure at the master's level. Family, work, and finances obstructed integration for many students in this research, and directly contributed to the two instances of departure and several cases of lingering. Additional research is needed to discover the ways in which the effects of external factors could be moderated to ensure higher rates of degree completion among master's students in general.

## **PREDICTING FUTURE STUDENT OUTCOMES**

Recognizing the limitations of the study, the findings in the present study nevertheless specify conditions that could be used to reasonable predict the outcomes of future students. A summarized list of such conditions follows:

### **-Conditions that Influence Persistence-**

1. Persistence is associated with individual drive and commitment to degree completion. Students committed to degree completion will more likely persist than students without such drive and commitment.
2. Persistence is associated with the presence of clear educational/career goals. Students with clear educational/career goals will more likely persist than students without clear educational or career goals.
3. Persistence is tied to academic integration with faculty through the award of long-term graduate assistantship positions. Students with long-term assistantship positions will more likely persist than students without long-term assistantship positions. Assistantships integrate students into the master's program. Integration strengthens student goals and commitments to degree completion.
4. Persistence is tied to mentoring-relationships with faculty (achieved through the award of an assistantship position). Students with faculty mentors will more likely persist than students without faculty mentors. Mentoring strengthens student goals and commitment to degree completion.
5. Persistence is connected to the financial rewards of assistantship positions. Students with long-term assistantship positions are less likely to seek employment outside of the department, and have more time in the department to develop integrative relationships with faculty and peers.
6. Persistence is associated with emotional and financial support from significant others. Students who receive emotional and financial support from significant others will more likely persist than students who do not receive such support from significant others.

7. Persistence in the form of continued enrollment is associated with social involvement with peers. Students who establish friendships with their peers will more likely continue their enrollment in the program term after term than students who do not establish friendships with peers.

#### **-Conditions that Influence Lingering-**

1. Lingering is associated with the lack thesis topics and with insufficient knowledge about the thesis writing process. Students who lack thesis topics and/or knowledge about the thesis writing process are more likely to delay completion than students who have topics and sufficient knowledge about the thesis writing process.
2. Lingering is tied to insufficient academic integration with faculty in the form of limited guidance about the thesis writing process. Students who receive little direction from faculty about thesis writing are more likely to delay completion than students who receive guidance from faculty about thesis writing.
3. Lingering is tied to insufficient academic integration with faculty in the form of diminished contact/direction from committee members during the thesis writing stage. Students who have limited contact or direction from committee members during the thesis writing stage are more likely to delay completion than students who have regular contact and/or guidance from committee members while writing theses.
4. Lingering is associated with work and family responsibilities. Students who work outside the department and/or who have childcare demands are more likely to delay completion than students who do not work outside the department and/or who do not have family responsibilities. Work and childcare demands restrict the potential for academic integration with faculty to occur and contribute to delayed degree completion.
5. Lingering is associated with changes in employment status (e.g., part-time to full-time) upon completion of required coursework. Students who begin full-time work outside the department upon completion of required coursework are more likely to delay



completion than students who do not begin full-time jobs outside the department upon completion of required coursework.

### **-Conditions that Influence Departure-**

1. Departure is associated with financial strain and work responsibilities outside the department. Students who work full-time outside the department are more likely to dropout than students who do not work full-time outside the department. Students experiencing financial strain are more likely to dropout than financially secure students.
2. Departure is tied to a lack of clear educational/career goals. Students who lack clear educational/career goals are more likely to dropout than students with clear educational/career goals.
3. Departure is associated with the lack of thesis topics. Students who lack thesis topics are more likely to dropout than students who have thesis topics.
4. Departure is associated with the lack of long-term assistantship positions. The absence of assistantship positions preclude students from becoming academically integrated into the program. Students without long-term assistantships are more likely to dropout than students with such assistantships.
5. Departure is associated with the absence of mentoring-relationships with faculty. Students who do not have mentors and/or who perceive their faculty relationships as limited and/or unrewarding are more likely to dropout than students who have mentors and/or perceive faculty-student relationships as rewarding. Insufficient academic integration with faculty weaken aspirations for degree completion and increase the likelihood of departure.
6. Departure is tied to a lack of drive and commitment to degree completion. Students who lack the drive and commitment to degree completion are more likely to dropout than students who are motivated to complete their degrees.

7. Departure is associated with insufficient involvement with peers. Students who feel isolated from their peer group are more likely to dropout than students who do not feel such isolation.

#### **-Student Recommendations for Change in the Sociology Master's Program-**

Before concluding discussion on the findings in this thesis, most participants in this research offered suggestions on changes in the master's program that could better facilitate student needs and expectations. A compiled list is as follows.

1. Develop and follow systematic procedures for awarding graduate assistantships to students. Inform students about these procedures upon entry into the program. Give all graduate students the chance to apply for assistantships and office space.
2. Design and implement a course that focuses on the mechanics of thesis writing and completion. Compile a thesis writing manual (e.g., "How to Write a Thesis") that explains the basic steps, from beginning to end, involved in writing a thesis. The packet should include information the following: 1) examples of approved thesis proposals; 2) thesis deadlines; 3) the amount of time students should expect to spend writing a thesis; and 4) examples of the types of documents that students need to file with the department and graduate studies office.
3. Limit the amount of time students have to complete their thesis. For example, give students three quarters to design, conduct, and defend their master's research.
4. Specify job descriptions for all professors on thesis committees. For example, the chair of a committee should fully understand his/her obligations to the thesis candidate and should also be able to articulate to the candidate the exact roles of all remaining committee members.
5. Design and implement a concise "hands-on" course that demonstrates how students tie theory into their research.

6. Require students to meet with advisors as soon as they are accepted into the program. Advisors should inform students what classes they need to take and when these classes are offered. Make orientation meetings with advisors a mandatory part of enrollment.

7. Involve students in faculty research and non-research projects (e.g., community involvement). Provide students with opportunities to develop more personal and professional relationships with faculty.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The findings on persistence suggest that final degree completion at the master's level is strongly influenced by academic integration with faculty members. Such integration is exemplified through the combined presence of long-term graduate assistantship positions and mentoring relationships with at least one faculty member. Assistantship positions link students to the faculty community whereby they develop professional skills and personally rewarding relationships with faculty. Integration with faculty strengthens student educational and career goals and motivates students to complete their master's degrees. Assistantship positions also provide students with the financial resources necessary for continued, active enrollment in the program.

The findings on lingering and departure suggest that delayed degree completion and dropout are strongly connected to insufficient academic integration with faculty. Because integration with faculty is achieved through assistantship positions, students without such positions are at a disadvantage. Students without

assistantship positions are often employed outside the department. Work demands restrict the amount of time these students can spend in the department which reduce the chances for integration with faculty to occur. Limited/unrewarding interactions and relationships with faculty may cause students to feel awkward or alienated. This prevents them from participating fully in the social and academic life of the department. Students without assistantships also have fewer opportunities to develop professional skills needed for future employment. Students who perhaps lose their assistantship position upon completion of required coursework typically seek employment outside the department. These conditions diminish contact with both faculty and thesis committee members during the thesis writing stage. The effects of not having an assistantship position (e.g., limited/unrewarding interactions with faculty, lack of mentoring, lack of direction about a thesis topic, diminished contact with faculty and committee members) contribute to student feelings of self-doubt and to a general ambivalence (e.g., anomie or normlessness) about membership in the program. Insufficient involvement with faculty weakens student career and educational goals, and subsequently contributes to lingering and departure.

Based on the foregoing conclusions, lingering and dropout could be reduced by implementing program changes which focus on procedures for awarding assistantship positions, faculty-student relationships, and student employment/finances. Several suggestions for change along these lines follow.

The sociology department should establish and follow democratic and systematic procedures for awarding long-term assistantship positions to all graduate students. First, it is assumed that students accepted into the program have the skills and abilities needed to succeed as a sociology master's students. It follows that all accepted students should then be given an equal chance to experience the rewards that accompany the assistantship position (e.g., professional growth, mentoring, financial security). Because this research found no significant differences in average cumulative undergraduate GPA nor in average cumulative master's GPA between finishers, lingerers, and departers, criteria for awarding assistantships should not be based on measures of academic ability alone. Faculty might consider student career and educational goals, prior work experience, community service experience, writing and lecture skills, student financial need, etc., in addition to relying on GPA when awarding assistantships to students.

Because the department operates on a limited budget and can award only a few students with assistantships, it could benefit from initiating research projects that are conducted by master's students and funded by business or community organizations. This arrangement might involve hiring several graduate assistants to act as community liaisons whereby they establish relationships with business organizations and, in effect, market student research services to the community (rather than the existing practice of volunteering student services for course credit).

Another way to offer assistantships to all master's students might involve

generating grant money for students to conduct paid research within the department. Here, faculty could instruct graduate students on how to investigate grant opportunities and how to write effective grant proposals. This arrangement could: 1) provide students with the skills to write thesis proposals; 2) provide students with thesis topics; 3) provide students with a marketable skill--grant writing; and 3) create conditions for integrative relationships with faculty and peers to occur. In either of these cases (e.g., paid community research or departmental grant writing), students would profit personally and professionally, and the department would benefit financially. These arrangements could also free-up teaching assistantship positions for those students truly interested in developing the skills needed for future teaching careers.

Lingering and dropout in the master's program might also be reduced by focusing on faculty-student relationships during the first term of enrollment. Some students have suggested the assignment of faculty advisors (e.g., not asked to choose advisors) prior to the first term of enrollment to increase the frequency of faculty-student interactions. Other students discussed enrollment in mandatory orientation sessions. Suggestions for the content of orientation sessions include: 1) the specific goals of the master's program; 2) procedures for obtaining office space and assistantship positions; 3) location of mail-slots; 4) location and use of computer equipment; 5) academic planning--advice on course offerings/selection; 6) post-graduation career planning. In short, orientation sessions should provide

students with a sense of initial and continued program structure. Long-term advising would also likely create the conditions for faculty-student mentoring relationships to develop.

Because departure and lingering stem from thesis experiences, the program should continue its focus on faculty-student relationships during the entire thesis writing stage. The thesis clearly represents a major structural barrier to degree completion, due to student lack of thesis topics and to lack of direction/contact from faculty and thesis committee members during the thesis writing stage. It is recommended that students begin thesis work as early as possible. This might involve implementing a first year applied theory-research class(es) which forces students to begin actual (e.g., not speculative) thesis work. For example, the first term, students would be required to define thesis topics and complete chapter 1 thesis drafts (e.g., related research chapter). During the same term, the course would force students to investigate and complete chapter drafts on related theory. The following term, the course would require students to begin methodology chapters and the first stages of data collection. The final term, students would be required to complete data analyses and draft a complete version of their thesis. Thesis committees could also be determined during this first academic year.

Students who lack thesis topics might benefit from being assigned topics which correspond to the demonstrated areas of interests and specialties (e.g., published studies) of faculty. This arrangement would define the role of thesis

committee members as specialists in a given area(s), and would provide students with the guidance and direction they need to start and complete their master's theses.

Finally, students need regular contact and support from committee members while conducting thesis research. The existing thesis process is a frustrating and isolating experience for many students. Students need advice, encouragement, and timely feedback from committee members. Because the thesis represents the final step to master's degree completion, it follows that student theses should be regarded as top priority by committee members. The thesis may also represent a student's most serious academic challenge and achievement. Faculty must consider this responsibility when they agree to act as thesis committee members.

While no educational program can please all students all of the time, the livelihood of various departments depends upon a flow of students who seek enrollment in recognized and respected programs that also provide some return on students' financial and academic investments. Providing students with positive experiences that produce a sense of personal and professional accomplishment should be a top priority to educators and administrators. The foregoing suggestions offer ways to implement constructive change in the sociology master's program with the aim of providing students with more personally and professionally rewarding educational opportunities and experiences.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **CONSENT FORM**

## CONSENT FORM

Date:

Name of Participant:

I agree to participate in this research regarding my experiences in the sociology master's program at PSU. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary, and that I may end this interview at any time.

I understand that the results of this research will be published in a master's thesis. The information I give will be held in confidence and I understand that the following safeguards will be taken to protect my anonymity in the research report:

1. The cassettes containing my interview will be labeled with a pseudonym which will be used throughout the entire research process.
2. Non-essential characteristics (e.g., dates in graduate school, undergraduate major, area of focus) will be changed with an attempt made to retain the "flavor" of the characteristic.
3. Transcribed interviews and audio tapes will not be kept at the university, nor will they be transcribed by university personnel.
4. No sociology personnel outside the researchers will read the transcript or the audio recording of my interview. This includes the thesis committee members, other professors, and other graduate students.

I also understand that I may choose from the following additional safeguards (both may be selected):

- \_\_\_ I would like to have *all* potentially identifying characteristics changed (e.g., gender and race) changed.
- \_\_\_ I would like to read the analysis section of the thesis before publication.

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Signature of Interviewer

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Signature of Interviewee

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## **-INTERVIEW GUIDE-**

**Research Goals:** *I am interested in learning about peoples' experiences as graduate students in the sociology master's program. I hope to learn more about why some people finish their master's degrees and why others decide either to transfer into other programs or leave school altogether. So, I'd like to ask you some questions about your experience as a graduate student.*

**I. Educational Goals:** *People have different reasons for going to graduate school. Can you talk about your reasons for deciding to get a master's degree? Probe the following areas:*

- a. What did you intend to do with your degree? Did you have any specific educational or career goals behind getting your degree?
- b. Why did you pick sociology as your area of graduate study?
- c. How did you discover the Master's program at PSU?  
Why did you choose to enroll in the program?
- d. Were you considering other programs or schools?
- e. Did you want to go on for a Ph.D or was this a terminal degree?
- f. How many years did you think it would take to complete your degree? Did it take longer than you expected.
- g. When did you enter the program?
- h. When did you graduate/dropout?

**II. External Forces:** *As you know, many students in the program have demanding work schedules and/or family responsibilities while they attend school. Can you talk about the kinds of things that were going on in your life while you were a student in the program? Probe the following areas:*

- a. Did you work off-campus while you were a student?

- b. Did you have family responsibilities? If yes, please describe.
- c. Did close family members and/or friends encourage you to stay in school? If yes, can you give some examples of how people encouraged/supported you?
- d. Do you feel that this encouragement/support helped you to complete/stay in the program? If no, did lack of encouragement from family/friends influence your experience as a student?
- e. What was the financial impact of going to graduate school? Can you give some examples?
- g. Did attending school affect your relationship with family members and/or friends? If yes, can you give some examples of how?
- f. What kinds of sacrifices did you make in your personal life so that you could attend graduate school? Can you give some examples?

**III. Integration with Faculty:** *I am using a theoretical model that suggests that the more connected students are to their college environment, the more likely they will remain and finish their degrees. So, I would like to ask you a few questions about your relationships with faculty members and your peers. Can you talk about what it was like to be a student in the program? Probe the following areas:*

- a. Who did you know (faculty) in the department? Were you on a first name basis with them?
- b. How did you develop relationships with the faculty you knew?
- c. What kinds of things did you discuss with the faculty members that you knew?
- d. How often did you have discussions with the faculty members that you knew?



- e. Can you describe what a typical interaction with a faculty member was like? How did these interactions feel to you?
- f. Did you have what would be considered a mentor? If yes, how did this person become your mentor? If no, was a mentor something that you wanted/expected?
- g. Did you feel that professors were interested your professional development? How so?
- h. How much time did you spend in the department?
- i. Did you feel any sense of rapport or connection with the professors of the department? If yes, can you give some examples of how you felt connected? If no, did you feel disconnected?
- j. Can you talk about how the program was structured? How did you know what to do as a student?
- k. Did you have an office? Did you have a T.A.ship? How did you get these things? How did other students get these things?
- l. Do you think that the program had a specific orientation? What is it? Were you comfortable with this orientation?
- m. What do you think of the coursework? Which courses did you like or dislike?
- n. What was your take on the thesis? How did you feel about doing a thesis?

***IV. Integration with Peers: Sometimes having friendships with other students helps to make graduate school more enjoyable. Can you talk about the members of your cohort?***

- a. Did you have a sense of a cohort? Did you feel like you were a member of this cohort?

- b. Did you establish any friendships with members of your cohort? If yes, how did this occur?
- c. Can you describe some typical interactions that you had with your cohort?
- d. What kinds of things did you discuss with them?
- e. Did you work academically with members of your cohort? If yes, can you give some examples of how you worked with other students? If no, what were your reasons for not working with other students?
- f. Did you socialize with them outside of the department? If yes, what are some of things you did with students outside of school. If no, what were your reasons for not socializing?
- g. Did students in the program support and encourage each other? If yes, can you give some examples of how students supported/encouraged each other?
- h. Did the support/encouragement of other students help you to complete your degree? If yes, please give some examples of how.
- i. Do you feel like you "fit-in" with your cohort while you were a student in the program?
- j. Did you feel a sense of rapport or connection with your cohort? How?

**V. *General Questions for Finishers:***

- a. Did you ever feel like dropping out of the program? If yes, what do you think prevented you from dropping out?
- b. Do you feel that your gender, race, age or any other personal characteristics affected your experience as a student in the program? If yes, how?
- c. Why were you able to finish your master's degree?

- d. Why do you think other people cannot finish?
- e. Would you do it again? Why?

**VI. *General Questions for Departers:***

- a. Did you ever feel isolated while you were a student in the program? If, yes, how or why?
- b. Do you feel that your gender, race, age or any other personal characteristics affected your experience as a student in the program?
- c. When did you decide to leave the program? Did a specific event make you decide to leave?
- e. Do you plan to return to the sociology master's program? To return to graduate school?
- f. Why do you think some students finish their degrees?

**VII. *General Questions for Lingers:***

- a. Did you ever feel like dropping out of the program? If yes, what prevented you from dropping out?
- b. Do you feel that your gender, race, age or any other personal characteristics affected your experience as a student in the program?
- c. Do you intend to finish your master's degree? When?
- d. What is preventing you finishing your degree?
- e. Why do you think some students finish their degrees?
- f. Why do some students dropout of the program?

**VIII. Concluding remarks:** *Are there any areas that I have failed to cover during this interview that would help me to better understand your experience as a student in the program? Are there additional comments/stories you would like to share?*

- a. Did the program meet your expectations? Did your experience match what you envisioned you would experience as a graduate student?
- b. If you could change anything about the program to better facilitate your needs, what would you change?
- c. What was the best thing about being a student in the program?
- d. What was the worst thing about being a student in the program?
- e. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would describe your overall experience as a graduate student?

**\*\* Lastly, I'd like to know how you felt about the interview. Do you have any suggestions or remarks about the interview?**

**\*\* Ask for the names of other students whom they think might be interested in participating in the research.**

## **APPENDIX C**

### **COVER LETTER**

# Portland State University

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P. O. Box 751, Portland, OR 97207-0751

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November 1, 1994

Dear PSU Sociology Master's Student:

We are Master's students conducting thesis research on people's experiences as graduate students in the sociology program at PSU. The purpose of our research is to learn more about why some people finish their master's degrees and why others decide either to transfer into other programs or leave school altogether. Your name and address were selected from a list of students who were admitted to the graduate program since fall quarter 1985. The student list was generated using the PSU Banner System.

We would like to interview you about your experiences as a graduate student. The interview should take about 45 minutes to complete. Your participation in the research would be completely voluntary and the information you provide will remain strictly confidential. Your experiences are very valuable to us. If you would like to participate in the research project, please return the enclosed postage-paid response card. We will then telephone you shortly thereafter to talk more at length and to schedule an interview at your convenience.

Thanks for your help in our project. If you have any questions, please telephone either of us at the sociology department, 725-3926, or contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, 725-3417.

Jennifer Zoltanski

Katie Staples